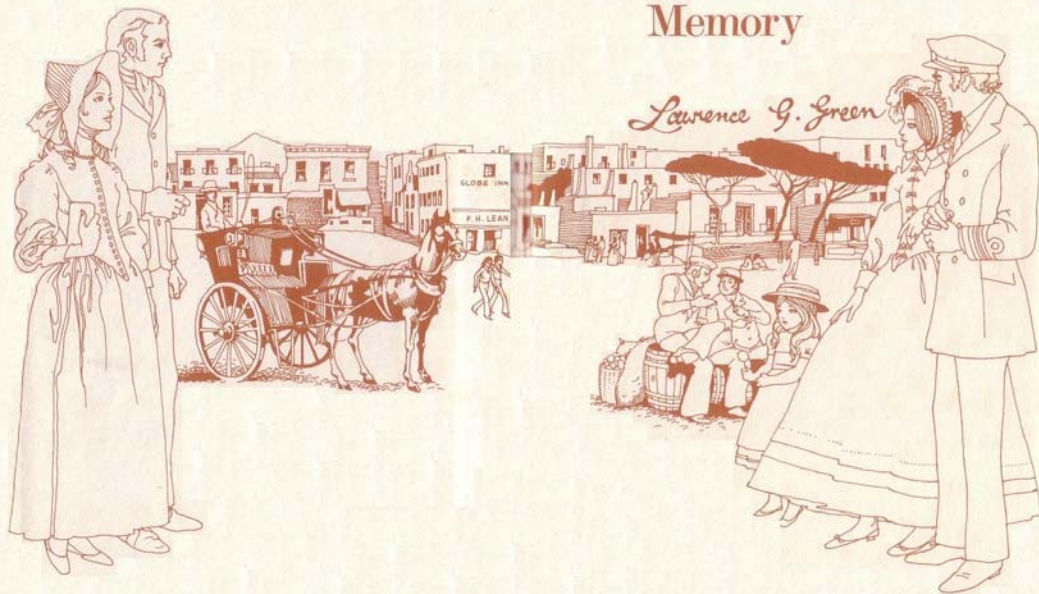


Harbours Of Memory

Lawrence G. Green



HARBOURS OF MEMORY

A book of personal experiences along South African and other romantic waterfronts,
odd characters encountered by the author and the strange tales they told.

BY LAWRENCE G. GREEN

*Author of "On Wings of Fire", "To the River's End", "Full Many a Glorious
Morning" and other books on Africa*

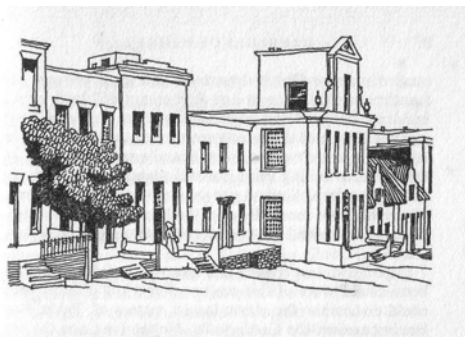
FRONT COVER

If you love the waterfront atmosphere these harbours of Lawrence Green's memories will give you hours of enchantment. Readers of Lawrence Green's previous books are aware that this experienced author shuns the well known stories and seeks the strange, weird and curious episodes that other writers have missed. His characters are not always respectable, he finds many of his people in bars and taverns, and their behaviour is often riotous and abandoned; hence every page is filled with unexpected and fascinating material.

Most of these harbours are in Southern Africa. The book opens in Table Bay and there are tales of Simon's Bay, Mossel Bay, Port Elizabeth, Port Alfred, East London, Port St. John's and Durban. East African harbours form part of this rich narrative and there are meetings with magicians in North Africa. Two of the most vivid chapters in the book deal with Gibraltar and Marseilles. Lawrence Green has a way of passing on to his readers his own enjoyment of life's pleasures and surprises. You will remember these adventures, including the wine and food.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE ROAD TO THE HARBOUR

DOCK ROAD was a roaring waterfront very close to Table Bay early this century when I first passed over the cobblestones bound for the harbour. Sailormen all seemed to be going in the opposite direction, heading for the thousand delights of the land. I can still see a ghostly panorama of sailing ships off the broad thoroughfare of Dock Road, square-rigged ships that

have vanished for ever. Most of the seamen's canteens and saloons have gone, too, but there are times when the voices and the music I heard in the sailortown of my youth come back to my ears. I find myself dreaming my way through the centuries in that atmosphere while Neptune's heroes stream past the dock gates to slake their thirsts as they have always done in the taverns of Cape Town.

Table Bay washed the fringe of the Dock Road at the turn of the century and long afterwards. That old waterfront from the Castle to Mouille Point had not changed much since the Dutch departed. The town between its frontiers of Buitengracht and Buitenkant still held many buildings designed and adorned by master craftsmen long ago and a little of the beauty remains to this day. Granite

cobblestones that came from Scandinavia as ballast in timber-laden sailing ships are still there, too, and I only wish that other relics had proved indestructible. However, I have my own memories and the tales I heard from bygone seafarers and observant characters of the old harbour.

Cape Town lost the sea and many waterfront buildings between the wars of this century. I met old citizens who could remember the storm-lashed waters of Table Bay beating against the Castle walls. Not so long ago the sea almost reached Garlick's store and in that area you could smell the fresh tang of seaweed on the rocks at low spring tides. Housewives walked down to Rogge Bay and bought line fish for their luncheons. Townsfolk strolled on

wooden jetties where coasters landed their cargoes. Little factories and the shops of all sorts of craftsmen flourished there. Brewing is left to the financial giants nowadays but the inspiring aroma of beer came from many small premises early this century. If you had barley, hops and the right sort of water, mash tuns, copper dome, coolers and casks, you could go into business. Those old brewers made brown ales, bitter and mild beers with their own distinctive colours, strengths and flavours, differing one from another like the wines of various estates. One of the large breweries stood almost on the sands of Woodstock beach. Every member of the staff had a glass on his desk and two bottles of ale were supplied free every day. Some ordered more and got it. Martienssen

of “tickey beer” fame had a brewery in Queen Victoria Street, of all places. Stott brewed at Green Point “to avoid the noxious vapours of the city”. Malay coopers passed on their secrets to their sons, using their eyes as they planned the curves of wholesome hand-made casks. I watched their descendants still at work in recent years under aged vines in the Somerset Road yards.

Along the Dock Road or in the seafaring streets leading out of it there were not only brewers and wine merchants but cigar makers and pawnbrokers, fish curers, ship chandlers and consuls. Drysdale the diver had a shed in Dock Road towards the end of the last century, close to the fish jetty and Kamp’s ice factory. Stable boys at Attwell’s bakery caught rats in cages, then let

them go and unleashed the fox-terriers; a fierce sport that no longer disturbs the sedate city of today. Shipwrecked sailors and other mariners have had a home near Dock Road for more than a century; and there, as a young reporter, I listened to their adventures, the tales of men who had faced the ordeals of the sea unafraid. Along the waterfront their language was fearful, their behaviour riotous and abandoned. How well the landlords in the harbour area knew their customers! Every seafaring nation had its own favourite bar; seamen from all the ports of the British Isles, from Norway and Portugal, could toast the barmaids in their own language and feel at home as long as their money lasted.

Billy Biddlecombe catered for blue-jackets at the Royal Navy Hotel while

Germans from the Woermann steamers went to the Hansa or the Hamburg. Union-Castle firemen paraded Bree Street with bands and pantomime elephants made of canvas, raising money for drinks at the Fireman's Arms. There was the Cambrian for Welsh sailors who came from Cardiff in full-riggers loaded with coal. Irish shellbacks rolled joyfully in and out of McCullie's pub the Limerick, or Murphy's renowned Ship Hotel. An Italian named Dimaio welcomed fellow-countrymen at the Sicilia in Riebeeck Street, while the Queen's at the dock gates entertained all the seafaring nations as it does to this day. Of course the bars, canteens, inns and taverns of this quarter were all cosmopolitan, but each one had its own strong personality. The atmosphere in most was Victorian. Splendid

engraved mirrors reflected the colours of the bottles; walls were covered with flowered paper; doors and windows were decorated with the proud symbols of the liquor trade, from sheaves of barley to vine leaves.

Some places went in for stained glass, so that the drinks, the polished copper measures, the porcelain and brass beer pulls, the lamps - and the customers - made up a kaleidoscope worthy of the brush of a Hogarth. But against this conventional background there were all sorts of curios and oddities gathered at the ends of the earth and presented to attractive barmaids by seafaring admirers. You could find anything from a Mexican stone idol to Japanese netsukes in those waterfront pubs. Murphy of the Ship Hotel went in for small panoramas, forerunners of the cinema. He also had peep-shows;

seamen dropped their coppers into the box and were a little disappointed when they stared at Queen Victoria's coronation with all the peers and bishops in perspective. Battles were better and execution scenes best of all.

Parrots were kept in a number of pubs; Amazonian parrots with exquisite green feathers touched with rose; African grey parrots with red tails and long-tailed Macaws. African greys were the most amusing talkers and Mick Sheehan of the Star Hotel in Waterkant Street owned one that was supposed to have come to the Cape in a man-o'war early last century. This bald parrot Koko looked the part though its longevity was probably exaggerated. "Give the fellow a groat", Koko often remarked, clear proof that it had lived in the days of that departed coin. Koko would shake

hands with Mick Sheehan and then say decisively: "You red-headed old rat - I don't want to speak to you". At that horse-drawn period Koko had great fun stopping hansam-cabs and other vehicles outside the Star with a loud and authoritative "Whoa!" Drivers shouted back and their angry remarks added to Koko's vocabulary. Koko endeared himself to customers by calling to the Cockney barmaid: "Let yer 'hand tremble Liz - give the gent a proper tot fer 'is money." And business often picked up during a dull evening when Koko shouted persuasively: "Hany horders ? Give yer horders fer the love o' Mike". However, there was a rival in the same street at the Table Bay Hotel owned by George de Lacy. This old parrot made clicking sounds in time with the piano and danced on its perch. When a dog

or cat appeared it snarled: "Get out you brute!" It would lie on its back at a word from George de Lacy and pretend to be dead. Then, raising its head, the parrot would announce gravely: "Trixie drinks like a fish."

Trixie, barmaid at the Great Eastern in Bree Street, was a large but shapely woman who had spent years at sea as a stewardess. She understood sailors, she had a philosophy of life and a deep knowledge of the trinkets and oddments brought in by customers. Trixie could value sapphires and moonstones from Ceylon, ivory and jade, carved teak, scarabs from Port Said, bead necklaces, gold and silver filigree and Kashmir shawls. If the customer was thirsty but penniless Trixie gave credit or accepted a piece of amber, a prayer rug, or a cameo from Naples. Seamen admired the shrewd Trixie and drank

her health in ports as far apart as Bombay and Valparaiso. Trixie maintained law and order with a wink and a gesture; she never had to call a policeman.

In those days before darts and radio every enterprising publican tried to provide something to accompany the unfailing charm of liquor. Teutonic hosts like Dolfie Scharfscheer ran proper beer halls with alcoves for secretive parties and counters laden with sausages, pickled herrings and sauerkraut. Dolfie had an impressive German fork beard and flowing moustache; and when he handled the beer engine and served the heady Munich beer with his wife playing a waltz at the piano a breath of Bavaria drifted out on to the Table Bay waterfront. Short drinks such as a glass of beer, sherry or hock cost a

tickey at the turn of the century. Pale ale came from England in hogsheads, but that cost more. Hungry seamen paid sixpence for pea soup or fish, a shilling for roast beef or steak. Many generous hosts provided bread, cheese and pickles free of charge. A favourite meal in many harbour taverns consisted of a plate of mulligatawny soup followed by sosaties and rice, curried fragments of mutton on bamboo skewers. This cost one shilling and sixpence, including a glass of wine.

Curries of various sorts were favourite everyday meals in the seafaring quarter. If you passed down Waterkant or Bree Street between certain hours there were such pungent aromas of chillies and garlic, mustard oil and onions, that you might have been in Calcutta.

Jacob Watermeyer, a Strand Street ship chandler, was the far-sighted business man who transformed the curry and rice dishes of Cape Town. This remarkable episode brought him and his assistant a fortune. The master of a British sailing ship owed Watermeyer money for stores and he departed without paying the bill. Next time he called, however, the honest captain entered Watermeyer's shop and announced: "I still can't pay, but if you care to come down on board my ship I will show you something valuable." Watermeyer and his assistant lunched in the saloon and were given the finest curry they had ever tasted. After lunch the captain handed them a list of ingredients and showed them how to mix the curry powder which had made the lunch memorable. I do not

pretend to know the exact amount of turmeric, ginger, chillies and other spices that went into the powder; it was a secret recipe. No one could say that it was dominated by this or that condiment. It was a true blend, and compared with the other curry powders of the period it seemed to have an almost magical effect on soups, pumpkin, beans, crawfish or snoek, eggs, chicken and meats. The captain revealed to Watermeyer the whole secret process and gave him a sealed barrel of the curry powder. Watermeyer cancelled the debt, three hundred pounds, a substantial amount to write off in those golden days. He put the curry powder on the market in tins and Cape Town flocked to his store to buy more. Here was a powder with just the right bite. It gave a rich, almost myste-

rious stimulating quality to a thick stew. People glowed and perspired and declared that Watermeyer's curry powder made them feel cool in the heat of summer. The assistant married Watermeyer's daughter and inherited the secret. He built a store in Adderley Street far more ornate than the little ship chandler's shop down on the waterfront. The store has gone but the curry powder survives and is still mixed just as that forgotten sea captain showed Jacob Watermeyer in the Indiaman's saloon more than a century ago.

Few old people record their memories and I was lucky to hear the curry saga before the origin was lost. When an interesting person dies a whole page of the past is torn away. I am grateful to those who spoke to me and left their most vivid impressions

for me to pass on. Such a man was Mr. W. H. Hinton, a railway pioneer. He knew Table Bay in the fifties of last century, before the breakwater was built. He saw the English navvies coming on shore in their sleeved waistcoats, moleskin or corduroy trousers and heavy boots to lay the first railway line.

Cape Town ended at the early morning market. Papendorp, with its fishermen's cottages, had not yet become Woodstock. London omnibuses served the suburbs. Salt River had only one house, Mrs. Slabbert's homestead. Hinton went to a dance there, in the forage loft, with a concertina and violin orchestra. He said Cape Town was a late town at that period. Youths paraded the waterfront with guitars and banjos and the Malays kept people awake at

night with interminable throbbing Khalifa sessions. On their high stoeps the citizens took their ease and drank their wine; and there were unkind visitors who said they would rather drink than eat. When the mail steamer arrived from England she fired two guns; the Castle replied and everyone hurried down to the Central Wharf to hear the news. Only when the newspapers were landed did Cape Town learn of the assassination of President Lincoln and other great events.

Hinton saw troops embarking for Algoa Bay in a wooden man-o'-war with paddle-wheels. He watched captured slaving vessels brought into Table Bay by the navy; seventy-foot Arab dhows from East African waters and Portuguese brigs from Angola. Slaves were housed at a

“negro station” at Papendorp and sometimes they escaped into the interior, vainly seeking a way home overland. “Prize negroes”, as the slaves were called, were apprenticed to farmers. Slave ships were put up to auction with their cargoes. In this way many useful craft found new owners in Cape Town and many cargoes of silk and cigars, tea and coffee, were purchased by the shops.

Leopards were still visiting the shambles at the foot of Adderley Street in search of offal when Hinton was a boy. Wharf Square, outside the old main line railway station, was close to the wharf. The slaughter house, built long before the station, supplied meat to troops bound for India before the Suez Canal was built. Shortly after World War II an aged coloured man showed officials

the door in this building where he had stood shovelling refuse into Table Bay. So many sand sharks gathered for the feast. that they called the place Haaibaai. Now the shambles has been demolished and the nearest sea is more than twelve hundred yards from Wharf Square.

Perhaps you remember the Protea Bar, part of the old Cape Town station, a bar noted for its tickey sherry rather than for a clientele of connoisseurs. This bar stood over Van Riebeeck’s first reservoir, built to hold the water from the mountain stream. Steps led down to the beach where sailors waited to lift the water barrels into the boats. They needed the water, but I think they would rather have had the powerful sherry of later years.

Hinton was present when the cornerstone of a great waterfront landmark was laid. He saw Sir George Grey the Governor, pouring oil and wine on the masonry that became a massive building with seven castellated towers. Grey wanted a building as magnificent as the Castle and so he chose a hospital design which might have been mistaken for an Elizabethan palace. Newcomers arriving by sea still gaze in wonder on the grand old-fashioned façade of his New Somerset Hospital. This is a monument not only to an able governor but also to the naval surgeon Dr. Samuel Bailey, founder of the original Somerset Hospital and still in practice when the New Somerset was built. Bailey served in H.M.S. Victory at Trafalgar, a man of many adventures, certainly a memorable

figure along the Table Bay waterfront.

British officers and civil servants from India, officials of the Honourable East India Company and others, were still visiting Cape Town during Hinton's youth. They regarded the Cape as a great sanatorium after years of ill-health in the East. They came in sailing ships with their horses, their carriages and Indian coachmen in turbans and white muslin; and often there were two thousand of them spending their rupees generously in the Cape Peninsula during the late summer. People called them "Hindoos" but it was an affectionate nickname. They brought new life as well as money to the town. Some of their favourite Indian recipes are followed by Cape Town cooks today. They also left us Indian names, words

and phrases. When the Suez Canal opened they departed. Most of them never returned, but there were some who saw the Cape again because they had married girls they met in Wynberg and Constantia.

Martin Leendertz, a waterfront reporter who passed on a few years ago, spoke to me of the Norwegian barques with square sterns that carried timber from Scandinavia. They were unsinkable but they leaked badly, so they were fitted with windmill pumps to empty their bilges without the usual back-breaking labour. This was also the hey-day of the “turret ships”, those peculiar steamers with narrow upper-decks and full bellies designed to defeat the Suez Canal charges based on deck measurements. Some master mariners regarded them as fine ships in heavy weather; others pointed out

that two “turret ships” had capsized. Two of the Clan Line vessels of this design were lost on the coast of the Cape Peninsula, but not because of the unusual design. Those old “turret ships” brought many heavy cargoes into Table Bay, railway material and other “Glasgow jewellery”. The small boys of Cape Town were more concerned about the arrival of a ship called the Crown of Aragon, which came in from Shanghai every year in good time for November the Fifth with her cargo of fireworks.

I asked Martin Leendertz to describe the waterfront aromas of his day and he replied at once: “Fish drying on the beaches, bales of snoek, piles of rubbish, seaweed and ozone, open drains and malodorous *steeps* - and the scent of pines as an occasional relief.” He said the south-easters and the

winter rains saved Cape Town from disaster.

Electric street lamps were switched on in Cape Town before the end of last century, but the waterfront bars clung to hanging lanterns or gaslight for years. Carbon filament lamps were unpopular; they were not bright enough and electricity was expensive. However, the harbour area was illuminated by harsh electric arc lamps. They burnt steadily without sputtering and showed many an unsteady seaman the way to his gangplank. Candlemakers were among the first to suffer from the advance of electricity, and few of the small craftsmen of last century have survived. In the streets near the harbour sixty years ago there were blacksmiths and saddlers, tallow-chandlers, carpenters, sailmakers and shoemakers. And

where are the old houses? Stately mansions with massive walls and lofty rooms stood side by side, lovely homes with small-paned windows and warm tints in their rooms. Town houses always had stoeps, often five feet above road level, stoeps with basements where the slaves once lived. Holland saw the creation of the stoep for the Dutch raised their floor levels several feet to allow windows in their basement rooms. Holland sent hundreds of thousands of handsome bricks called *klompjes* to decorate the Cape stoeps; bricks that weathered and became a rich golden yellow. Cape Town enjoyed the open-air stoep life but these obstructions in every street became a nuisance. Yet the old Cape Town houses would have lost much of their beauty without the flight of steps and the raised floor running the whole

length of the façade with benches at each end. Those were the days of Mauritius teak and Knysna stinkwood beams, heavy carved doors, pediments with decorated panels, gables with sweeping scrolls, slates from Robben Island, reeds from the Liesbeek river, wrought-iron and brass railings, iron and brass lanterns worked into fanlight designs, dark and cool dining halls, trellised vines in the courtyards and pomegranate trees twisted with age. Some of the ancient vines are still yielding mellow crystal grapes and dwarf fig trees still give their fruit. Most picturesque of all adornments to the façades of large houses near Table Bay was the *dak-kamer*. The purpose of this roof-room is controversial but I cling to the belief that it was intended to give the owner a view of the shipping. Among the fine houses of

the merchants in Cape Town's seafaring streets were much smaller dwellings with a charm of their own. These were the single storeyed homes of artisans and others, a central door flanked with a window on each side, often with a Malay parapet and flat roof in obedience to the fire laws. Whale oil and molasses made the roof waterproof, a fitting mixture for a seaport.

Once the cooks of waterside Cape Town were able to hear the breaking of the seas as they lifted their nostrils to a salt tang that mingled with the kitchen aromas. You can still find some of those old kitchens. Fireplaces were ten feet wide and there was a raised brick hearth and hooks for the burnished pots. A flue was built into the chimney for curing bacon with the smoke of dried mealie-cobs. Water

spouted from an ornamental tap in the shape of a copper dolphin. Sheets of brass hung on the walls to protect the lime-washed surface. On the shelves were lacquer boxes of spices, blue earthenware Flemish jars for pickled fish, oriental stone jars for holding pickles and ginger, flagons with flavouring essences. They needed many servants and they had them. When you stand on the stone flags (once polished daily with wax and ox-blood) the scene returns. Dark, bare-footed girls bustle round the tart-pans. Joints sizzle over the coals. From the oven comes a whiff of *bobotie*, from a stewpan a ravishing promise of curried chicken, while the *vark-karmenaadjies* crackle on the grill. Look through the windows of lilac or pale-green panes from Holland and you may imagine

the *huisvrouw* of other days, a faint reflection of hooped skirts in the glass.

Some of the old tavern names remain, but the buildings, the bars and the people have been transformed by the wand of respectability. The waterfront resorts were not all romantic but they held in their strong fumes the true breath of adventure. I wish that I could listen now to the conversation in the Queen of the South, the Dolphin or the Limerick during some long-forgotten evening when the old sailor men came up the road from the harbour to find release from the great wealth of memory.

CHAPTER TWO

JAGGERY AND TAMARINDS

HORSES still dominated the road to the harbour for two or three decades this century. Strong wagon horses with shaggy hooves drew the cargoes from every wharf at Table Bay Docks and mule carts hauled coal round the port. Good light horses were owned by hansom cab drivers and those who favoured victorias and growlers, broughams and other romantic four-wheelers of that graceful era. The sounds of the world of horses never jarred on people like the abominable motor-car.

Most of the hansoms were in charge of Malays wearing the pointed straw pagoda hats but long ago there were also a number of Irish drivers. I was bound for the docks one day and look-

ing speculatively at a hansom named "Liffey" when a lyric brogue fell on my ears. "Sure sorr an' ye've an eye for a horse - there aren't many left like you sorr," came the flattering words. "Is it to the docks ye're going sorr?" I was looking at the wheels, not the horse; the iron-shod wheels that promised a bumpy ride. However, the blarney was irresistible and I jolted over the cobblestones in the Irish cab.

When the first hansoms reached Table Bay Docks from London in the middle of last century they brought with them the reputation of being fast and disreputable. This was never shaken off. They were decorated with names and peculiar emblems which took the place of armorial bearings, but Cape Town changed the names and the designs. "My Sweetheart" and "Forget-me-Not" became "Flying Dutchman" and

“Lismore Castle”. Hansoms were for short journeys without heavy luggage, of course, as there was little room inside or out. They were dashing vehicles with poor brakes. When the horse fell the passenger was thrown off his seat on to the glass doors. No lady rode unescorted in a hansom. Four-seater hansoms were known as “parlour” models, two passengers sitting on each side; but few of these were seen in Cape Town. Rubber tyres were first fitted towards the end of last century and then the hansom drivers hung bells on the collars of their horses. Certainly the jingle was more pleasant than the noise of iron tyres but there were old fashioned or parsimonious drivers who preferred metal to rubber. Hence the blarney. However, a hansom carried two people from the station to the docks

for one shilling early this century. You could pay by the hour, half-a-crown. Cheap enough, but disputes were frequent, with the driver shouting angrily through a little trap-door in the roof of the cab.

Cape Town’s vast horse-drawn traffic kept a vanished army of craftsmen at work. Wheelwrights made spokes and rims by eye. Some of the paintwork was exquisite and undercarriages were given curves and scrolls of real beauty. You saw elegant cane panels, lamps of frosted glass, fine leather fittings and upholstery. All this gave scope for individual skill and ideas for there was no mass production in the carriage trade. It was a gay world of polished brass and happy clattering horses, the honest smell of harness and the sweat of horses. A few

wheelwrights and other craftsmen were still using their old tools after the middle of this century. Reliable drivers are vanishing, however, and never again shall I hear an Irish voice assuring me (with the greatest possible inaccuracy) that I have an eye for a horse.

Hansom cabs and taxis were for emergencies when I was a young reporter and I often took the little train from Monument station to Table Bay Docks. They called it the “Dolly” for no known reason. The fare was fourpence. Native dock labourers had their own train, the “Bombela”, a fearsome cavalcade of dingy coaches drawn by such an ancient engine that one almost expected to see William Dabbs on the foot-plate. “Dolly” landed me near the port office, where I had to

copy the list of shipping arrivals and departures and gather any news that was offering. I returned to town by train, called at the meteorological office for the unreliable weather forecast and then walked to Caledon Square for the real work of the day, the police courts. Crime had its interesting episodes but I would rather have spent the whole day at the docks.

Of course I had known Table Bay Docks, every corner of the docks, for years before I became a reporter. No one thought of putting guards at the gangway and so I was able to walk on board all manner of unusual and adventurous craft. I was also fortunate in meeting friendly waterfront characters who helped me to peer through those strange doorways which open into the world of seamen, ships and the wide oceans. They shared their

experiences with me so that I could look back on long-departed vessels, large and small; unknown and unrecorded sea dramas were played out again; I could almost hear the voices and feel the lash of the salt spray. I came to know the cafe near the port office where Ma Rees kept a cow in the bathroom; and I voyaged with young David Wasserfall the ferryman from the port office to the clock tower without ever realising that this hard-working oarsman would still be rowing the same boat nearly half a century later.

Among my first waterfront friends was “Young Bob” Stephens, son of “Old Bob” the boatbuilder. “Old Bob” brought his family to the Cape from Sydney in 1900 and set up in business. He hired out pleasure boats from the Central Jetty and later from the Pier;

and many a shilling I handed him out of my pocket-money for the joy of pulling a dinghy round the ships in the bay. “Young Bob” told me about a crimp named Charlie Mitchell who had a place in Mechau Street where sailors were entertained generously and shipped away senseless with a “donkey’s breakfast” and a bottle of dop. Charlie cashed the advance note, three pounds for an able seaman. Yes, there were all sorts of sharks in human form along the old waterfront. “Young Bob” said his greatest shock came when a young woman hired a boat and asked him to row out into the bay. He turned his head and when he looked back she had vanished. Piet Fourie of the harbour police recovered the body some days later. She had loaded her clothes with lead so that she went

straight down when she dropped over the stern.

Another waterfront friend spoke of memorable craft that called before my time. He saw the New Bedford whaler *Josephine* sail in after a South Atlantic cruise that had lasted fourteen months. All about her rose the pungent odour of sperm oil. She was manned by Cape Verde islanders, Portuguese, negroes and half-castes, with American master and mates. My friend had a meal in the galley; it was unexpectedly good, a rich mutton stew with potatoes and hunks of bread. They had called at Tristan for meat and vegetables, and that explained the fresh mutton. The captain had his wife with him; it was strange to find a woman on board a whaler. They hunted the sperm in open boats and fired their harpoons

from a brass blunderbuss. That old trade was coming to an end. I missed the *Josephine* but some years later I saw the last of all the sailing whalers, the *Canton*. She was a barque, built at Swansea in 1835, wrecked in 1909, not long after leaving Table Bay. There were many venerable ships in those days, and their timber lasted much longer than the modern steel.

World voyages in small craft were rare early this century. A few years after the pioneer Joshua Slocum called at Table Bay in the *Spray* there came a nine-ton ketch that circled half the globe without any publicity at all. She was the *Brighton*, bound from Brighton, England, to Broome in Western Australia on a pearling venture. The *Brighton* was manned by two men and a twelve-year-old

boy Antonio who had stowed away under a heap of sails when the ketch called at the Cape Verde islands. Skipper A. L. Napper had previously commanded a millionaire's yacht, the Vanderbilt turbine-engined *Tarantula*. During the passage of ten thousand miles they had watched a whale fighting a swordfish and two thresher sharks. The sharks killed the whale. Another whale menaced the little *Brighton*, diving under her repeatedly, so Napper brought his rifle on deck and put a bullet in the head. Their pet spaniel Nelson went mad and was lost overboard. In a northerly gale the decks were swept, the rudder was damaged and they had to use the sea anchor and oilbags. Steering difficulties delayed them for so long that they ran short of food. Christmas dinner, five hundred miles

from Table Bay, consisted of tinned mutton and pudding. If they had not caught flying fish they might have starved. After taking on provisions and water the adventurers sailed away to Australia across the stormiest ocean in the world.

Another yacht that aroused great interest was a large vessel, the *Pandora*. As H.M.S. *Newport*, a gunboat in the Royal Navy, she had been present at the Suez Canal opening ceremony. Then she had surveyed routes in the Arctic and the Straits of Magellan. An adventurer named T. C. Kerry bought her in the hope of making a fortune in some mysterious way. He was bound for New Guinea. I never heard of the *Brighton* or the *Pandora* again, but I often wondered. I suppose there is no one now who can tell me the true story of the American

three-masted schooner that entered Table Bay during my schooldays and anchored far out. She had no communication with the port authorities; but “Young Bob” rowed out and spoke to the visitors. He said they belonged to some weird religious sect and were bound for Patagonia to start a settlement. However, they had been blown off their course and had fetched up in Table Bay. Did they ever reach their destination?

“Old Bob” Stephens was a fine yacht-builder. Among his customers was a fellow Australian named Edward Wearin, a railwayman with a deep love of the sea. “Old Bob” built the *Advance* for Wearin; a yacht rather like the scow types that raced in Sydney harbour at that time. She was only twenty-two feet overall, but seaworthy. Ted Wearin left the

railways and went sailing in her. He sailed the little yacht up to German South West Africa and made so much money that he was able to buy the fifty-ton steamer *Magnet*. I have told Wearin’s story elsewhere,¹ but there was one famous episode which I have not related before. It was in January 1914 that Wearin was suddenly asked by Colonel F. H. P. Creswell (then leader of the Labour Party) and Advocate Lucas whether he could take the *Magnet* to sea immediately on a mission which they would disclose after they had left the docks. Wearin was tempted by the amount offered for the charter but pointed out that the boilers were cold and a scratch crew would have to be

¹ In my book “At Daybreak for the Isles”, published by Timmins,

found. However, the ship got away within a few hours at eleven that night and Creswell gave Wearin his orders.

Wearin was to intercept the S. S. *Umgeni* outside Table Bay and bring back a group of Rand strike leaders who had been deported by General Smuts. Creswell had secured a court order, an injunction for the deportees to be released on bail. Meanwhile the *Umgeni* had sailed from Durban secretly with the whole passenger accommodation booked for the deportees. She was bound for London direct but when she passed the Agulhas light her master signalled: "All well." By this time the action by Smuts had been published and Creswell thought it would be possible to meet the *Umgeni* at sea and present the captain with the court

order. Few ships carried wireless in those days. Creswell failed to secure a government tug and Wearin's *Magnet* was the only available ship. In spite of all the difficulties the plan might have succeeded but the train, bringing Lucas to Cape Town arrived late. Wearin steered westwards at full speed and sighted the *Umgeni* but he was unable to overtake her. A daring and ingenious plan had failed. If only Wearin had been able to leave Table Bay Docks two hours earlier he would have intercepted the *Umgeni*. However, the episode did not influence the course of history to any extent for all the deportees returned to South Africa after a free if compulsory trip to England. "Young Bob", who often sailed with Wearin, told me that the *Magnet*

earned more that day than she usually made as a sealer.

Forgotten adventures! The *Kinfauns* Castle came into Table Bay early in 1914 with a strange tale. About a hundred small fishing craft had been blown out to sea by a West African tornado and the few ships equipped with wireless at that time were asked to keep a sharp look-out for them. More than three hundred lives were saved by this early use of radio. A cable ship searched the ocean for six days and rescued a number of thirsty, starving men. A seaman in the crow's nest of the *Kinfauns Castle* noticed a tiny speck on the ocean. It was a canoe with two negroes lying unconscious under a white cloth. They soon recovered, and told the captain that two steamers had passed by and left them to their fate.

Strange, romantic and mysterious craft entered Table Bay in the early years of the century. They were under observation, whether they knew it or not, and there are one or two secrets which I can now reveal. Some ships departed with their stories untold, leaving my burning curiosity unsatisfied. For years a man with the eyes of a seaman and the bearing of a soldier wandered about the docks with a small camera. His name was Jones and I have some of his faded photographs before me. He showed great interest in the experiences of all sorts of seafarers; but few of those who spoke to him realised that they were talking to a naval intelligence officer, later Lt.-Colonel H. L. Jones of the Royal Marines. He loved his work and had a special regard for the men who

sailed to German South West Africa in little coasters. Among them was a drunken but amusing skipper named Anderson, owner and master of a lovely white three-masted barquentine. This vessel had been the British yacht *Sunrise* (not to be confused with Lord Brassey's famous *Sunbeam*). Then she had been renamed *Yves de Kerguelen* after the discoverer of the French sub-Antarctic island. She made several voyages to Kerguelen under the French flag; then Anderson bought her and changed the name to *Isles of Kerguelen*. He used to sail her to Walvis Bay and in the course of his legitimate business he gathered information about German activities along the coast. All this he passed on to Jones.

Colonel Jones told me that he became uncrowned King of Table Bay Docks when war was declared in 1914, and he ruled his domain from the Clock Tower. One noteworthy episode, remembered all too vividly by those who were there, was the arrival of the Italian barque *Mincio* towed by two Norwegian whalers. The *Mincio*, an iron ship of 1739 tons, built in 1877, was two hundred and fifty feet long with a beam of thirty-eight feet. (Note those dimensions, for they have a direct bearing on the story.) Launched as the *Cleomene*, she had been sold to Italian owners and she had called at Luderitzbucht for provisions a few days before the declaration of war. War came and the Germans did not know what to do with more than two thousand Cape coloured labourers

who had been working on the diamond fields. They sent two hundred of them to Table Bay in the German coaster *Bismarck*, but nearly two thousand remained. When the *Mincio* anchored off Luderitzbucht the Germans informed her captain that they would sell him provisions only on condition that he carried away the unwanted labourers. The captain foresaw the frightful and dangerous conditions which would be caused by so many passengers and pointed out that his crew would be unable to handle the sails with such a crowd on deck. "You refuse? Then you cannot have food or water," replied the German harbourmaster.

So the *Mincio* remained at anchor while her captain grappled with his insoluble problem. Some of his men fell ill and some communicable

disease was suspected. The Germans placed the ship in quarantine, disinfected her and kept the sick men under arrest on shore. Meanwhile the coloured labourers were still at work on the Kolmanskop diamond fields. Luderitzbucht was abandoned by the German forces and civilians, stores were taken up-country, the railway line was dismantled. German officials of the diamond company read out faked messages to the coloured men; they were told that the German army had entered Paris and that the British fleet had been sunk. Then they were asked to volunteer for service as transport-riders with the Germans in South West Africa, but very few responded.

At this period of crisis two Norwegian whalers steamed in and asked for coal. They were told they could have

the coal provided they towed the *Mincio* to Table Bay. The Italian agreed to this plan and all non-German subjects were asked to leave Luderitz-bucht in the sailing ship. White people had to pay five pounds a head, coloured labourers three pounds; and every passenger had to buy food before embarking. "Sleep where you can," the unhappy passengers were told when they went on board the *Mincio*. For most of them sleep was out of the question. Mr. G. K. Forbes, a British passenger, and twenty-eight other white people were given shelter, but the coloured men were huddled in every corner of the open deck. There were eighteen hundred and ninety-one of them standing and lying down in turn, and with only the most elementary sanitation. The *Mincio* was crowded like a slaver. It was

impossible to serve proper food during the passage to Table Bay but the Italian cook handed out mealie meal and rice at intervals. In spite of the hardships only one man died during the six days at sea. He was sewn up in canvas and put over the side early one morning.

Colonel Jones told me he looked out of the Clock Tower window when the *Mincio* was towed into Table Bay Docks and it seemed to the astonished onlookers that the ship was crawling with ants. No one had ever set eyes on such a human cargo before. As she passed between the Clock Tower and port office an appalling stench smote the whole area. Colonel Jones noticed that the ship was listing to starboard as she approached the West Quay. "She had hardly touched the fenders when nearly two thousand labourers jumped

on shore and raced for the dock gates,” declared Colonel Jones. “I have never seen anything so funny in my life. They poured through the gates into Dock Road without taking the slightest notice of the helpless officials. After the horrors of the *Mincio* they just wanted to get home.”

There were sequels to this most sensational arrival Table Bay Docks had ever witnessed. Colonel Jones found that he could not work in the Clock Tower owing to the smell from the *Mincio*, so he and Captain “Bully” Leigh, the port captain, paid an official visit. They got no further than the gangway. Her upper deck was a foot deep in every sort of filth, but the captain of the *Mincio* remarked: “I am quite happy - why should you worry?” Captain Leigh exploded at this and

had the *Mincio* towed into the bay immediately.

Cape Town banks were invaded by hopeful coloured labourers who presented the wages they had received from the diamond companies in German paper marks. Not a penny would anyone give them. The “Cape Argus” suggested that wealthy Germans who had not yet been interned might consider redeeming the paper money of their Fatherland. There was no response. A coloured labourer named Jack Johnson was charged with stealing worthless notes from his comrades during the voyage but the magistrate decided that he had no jurisdiction over a foreign ship outside the three-mile limit. William Small, an American negro who had been serving in the *Mincio*, complained to the American Consul

that the Germans had given him twenty-five lashes in Luderitzbucht gaol after he had been knifed in the stomach in a fo'c'stle brawl. He went to hospital. And to the relief of everyone at Table Bay Docks the *Mincio* sailed in ballast for the Gulf of Mexico without putting her nose into the harbour again.

Were the cargoes handled at Table Bay Docks more romantic in the days of my youth? I set eyes on strange bales and cases, and there always seemed to be a friendly stevedore at hand to explain the names to an eager schoolboy. I saw dragon's blood from Japan, the resin used as a medicine; camphor and cassia-buds, aniseed oil and musk. Once there was a barque from India with a manifest that called for an interpreter; she had piece-goods such as palampores, doosooties and

cushtaes; bales of salem pores, the cotton fabrics known as baftahs and carridaries; strong towels called humhums; Calcutta silk loonghees and paunch mats. She had the coarse brown sugar called jaggery on board; gunny bags of mirabolines like acorns; casks of tamarinds and bales of madder, the root that yields a brilliant red dye.

Zanzibar sent beeswax in beer hogsheads. There were bales of cinnamon and chests of cloves, coffee in casks. Bags of pepper arrived, too, stowed away from all other edible cargo so that the aroma would not spoil more delicate flavours. Dates came in cases and barrels. Tea shipments bore marks such as "Gunpowder", "Hyson" and "Pekoe". Western Province wheat was loaded for Mauritius, a treacherous cargo that

shifted at sea if it was not stowed carefully. You could find barrels of anchovies, kegs of sturgeon, Irish hams in casks, puncheons of rum. Palm kernels sometimes proclaimed their presence by an odour that made the stevedores giddy. Rice was another dangerous cargo in old-fashioned ships; it heated the hold like an oven. Yes, I studied commerce and geography in my own way when I was a schoolboy. Table Bay Docks, the small harbour of those days, taught me to recognise everything from copra to whangee canes.



CHAPTER THREE SKELETON HARBOUR

CAPE TOWN IS a city built on skeletons. In the mud of the harbour and along the old shoreline rest thousands who perished during the gales and the plagues of the centuries. Often as a reporter I was sent to excavations where builders or drainage gangs had unearthed skulls and bones. Sailors and citizens of long ago came

up into the sunlight and I tried to guess how they had died.

Professor M. R. Drennan the anatomist made a collection of skulls found by chance. Oldest of all were the Strandlopers who roamed the Table Bay beaches long before Van Riebeeck's arrival. The banks of the Salt River yielded skulls of many South African native races and the professor could not explain, why so many primitive people should have gone to their graves in that area. Perhaps there were devastating epidemics so long ago that the folklore of the Bushmen and Hottentots held no memories of the old disasters.

When railway engineers demolished Fort Knokke to build a new main line they searched for the legendary secret passage between the fort and the Castle. All they found were

South African War relics: dioxies, stirrups, rusty rifles - and skeletons. No doubt they were the bones of soldiers buried there in the days when star-shaped Fort Knokke, the powder magazines and other buildings were links in the "Sea Lines" stretching along the waterfront. Ziekestraat has also given up its dead in recent years. You know it as Corporation Street but in the early days of the Cape settlement it ran beside the Company's hospital. When the *zieketroosters* failed in their task, when scurvy-stricken sailors died, the bodies were buried close to the first of all Cape hospitals. And when the ground was excavated for a new parking garage a few years ago the skulls appeared of men who had never dreamt of motor-cars.

I was reminded of these strange encounters with old Capetonians when the mile-long tunnel was made recently between the post office and the new railway station. The tunnel runs along the edge of the site of Van Riebeeck's mud fort, the square "Good Hope" fort with four bastions, and the Amstel or Fresh River flowed past one bastion. This fort covered almost half the present Parade and parts of it remained there for half a century. As the Parade was not built over, the ground was not disturbed until the post office tunnel pierced the unexplored area. Foremen in charge of this sort of work are alive to the possibility of discovering historic relics, and Mr. R. O. Gericke reported finding old glass and pottery, porcelain and seventeenth century clay pipes in the

Amstel River bed. Finally he came upon two coffins, side by side. University archaeologists and other scientists then carried out a clever piece of detective work and decided that the remains went right back to the Van Riebeeck period. These may have been the remains of Siven Erasmus and Jacob Hartensz. According to an entry in Van Riebeeck's diary on May 20, 1652, these were the first two men to die as a result of illness in the new Cape settlement. The excavations also brought to light old Dutch and Flemish pottery, Chinese ware, corroded glass and parts of a shoe. Relics found under the railway station were fairly recent; late Victorian inkpots, mineral water bottles and china.

Cape Town has known many epidemics, some so deadly that the streets

became silent. People chewed angelica root and orange peel in the hope of warding off various plagues. Horses did their work with herbs in their nostrils. There were panic-stricken days and weeks when the death-roll seemed to threaten the whole population.

Important people who died at sea in the Dutch East India Company's ships were not always buried at sea. When the ship carried sand ballast the body would be interred in the hold and re-buried in church on arrival in Table Bay. This was the procedure when the wife of a merchant died in the *Vliegende Swaan* towards the end of the seventeenth century. Soon afterwards the Council of Policy decided to remove the church and burial ground from the fort. Hundreds of people were buried in and round the Dutch

Reformed Church at the top of the Heerengracht. During a funeral in the eighteen-forties a vault fell in and several people disappeared suddenly. They escaped with their lives and the graveyard then received attention.

Smallpox reached Cape Town early in the eighteenth century. This was the epidemic which almost exterminated the Hottentots and carried off one-quarter of the white people. Smallpox was then known as *kinderziekte* because so many children died. During one epidemic the military authorities were unable to call up the forces for the annual parade. It was reported that "owing to the mortality in the ranks and the loss of trumpeters, pipers and drummers the muster would make a miserable show and would far from impress any foreign vessels that happened to be riding in Table Bay."

It seems that the first smallpox contagion entered Cape Town in the clothing of people who had been ill during the passage from India. Washerwomen at the slave lodge were among the first victims. Corpses of so many Hottentots lay about the settlement that the air was fouled and burial parties had to be sent to every kraal. The diarist recorded that the air was "very unwholesome" and noted that two pigeons fell dead from the governor's house in the Castle. Soon there was no timber for coffins. Nearly one thousand white people died in one epidemic and more than that number of slaves. Smallpox was, of course, the scourge of the world during the eighteenth century and it accounted for ten per cent of the mortality from all causes; thus the world was willing to try any promise of a remedy. Jenner's

investigations into the link between cowpox and the immunity enjoyed by cowherds from smallpox led to vaccination and very early last century a Portuguese ship brought the first consignment of vaccine to the Cape. Many patients were treated at Rentzkie's Farm within sound of the Table Bay breakers. More than a thousand people who died of smallpox were buried on the farm.

Only the toughest people survived the surgery of the eighteenth century. Valentyn, the Dutch clergyman and author, watched a soldier's arm being amputated above the elbow after it had been shattered by a cannon shot. "He was placed in a chair and only begged the surgeon not to hurt him more than was necessary," Valentyn wrote. "The surgeon having made the incision cut through the bone with three jerks. The

arm was shown to the poor fellow and a cordial was given to him, when he said: 'God be thanked that I have been able to endure the pain.' He died two days later."

Conditions in the Cape Town hospitals during the eighteenth century were responsible for many deaths. Governor Louis van Assenbergh investigated the high death rate and discovered various scandals. People suffering from all sorts of illnesses were in the same wards. Patients able to crawl visited a tavern close by. One cook and two slave assistants prepared the meals for five hundred people. Towards the end of that century there were two physicians and they often had one thousand patients in hospital. Every ship brought one hundred or more scurvy cases. One eighteenth century visitor gave other reasons for the high

death-rate in Cape Town. "Vast numbers die between forty and fifty so that a very old man or woman is reckoned a wonder," she wrote. "They are a gross people, eating a good deal of grease in their food and needing exercise. Labour is left entirely to the slaves."

Under the Castle lie countless skeletons, as one might expect in a building where so many men were tortured and executed. Skulls and skeletons, iron neckbands and thumbscrews have been found in the dungeons. Dutch governors built five long tunnels from the Castle as escape or communication routes. One led to Roeland Street, the second to Hof Street, the third to Fort Knokke and the fourth and fifth to the Imhoff and Craig batteries close by. One tunnel was discovered in recent years

when the floor gave way and a man fell into a dark passage among a heap of bones. When the bones were examined some were found to be human, others animal. They must have been there for centuries, and no one was able to solve the mystery. Mr. G. W. Allen, soldier and guide at the Castle, explored all the tunnels as far as possible, until he reached points where they had caved in. Now all the entrances and exits have been sealed as a safety measure.

Cape Town's small police force was in charge of sanitation just before the middle of last century. Two wagons, fourteen carts and two water carts were provided; but a quarter of a century passed before the citizens approved of an efficient service for the removal of buckets and the cleaning of the streets. This was a

time when people believed that smells caused disease. The first view of Cape Town was from the sea. When the newcomer landed he was shocked to find stinking canals bearing every sort of rubbish to the harbour. Much of the filth was flung back on to the beaches by the tides. Skeleton harbour indeed!

A mysterious epidemic added more than one thousand skeletons to Cape Town's graveyards a century ago. This was the so-called "Mauritius fever". Some doctors swore it had come from Mauritius; others declared it had arisen in Cape Town as a result of the weather combined with filthy conditions. To this day the medical historians have been unable to find an accurate scientific name for the disease that haunted Cape Town for months and killed one person in thirty.

The death-rate among the afflicted was one in five. Dr. Landsberg, the dispensary doctor, first reported the epidemic when he found an unusually large number of fever cases arriving for treatment. Patients suffered from weariness, cold chills and persistent headaches; some became deaf, others were delirious. The attack lasted ten days and those who recovered were soon back at work. Dr. R. Lawson, inspector general of hospitals, had prophesied that a wave of illness would occur in mid-winter; and the same disease was reported almost simultaneously in Mauritius and Cape Town. It was not malaria but small doses of quinine were given as a tonic. The doctors also prescribed aperients and emetics and encouraged perspiration. The Rev. T. E. Fuller, then editor of the "Cape Argus" (afterwards

Sir Thomas Fuller, M.L.A.) raised £500 for soup kitchens. The government provided extra medical help but the doctors were overworked and the New Somerset Hospital was overcrowded. Dr. Landsberg went down with the fever but recovered; Doctors Graf and Brown were among the victims who died. The epidemic became so serious that the Old Somerset Hospital, which had been closed for years, was re-opened by the government to help those who could not find beds elsewhere. Altogether more than five thousand people caught "Mauritius fever".

When it was all over Major R. Thornton, a military surgeon, pointed out that there had been only two deaths in the garrison of nearly two thousand men. Nine hundred convicts had escaped the epidemic completely.

Among the six hundred lepers on Robben Island there had been two mild cases and no deaths. Major Thornton deduced that "Mauritius fever" had been caused by dirt and want and a flagrant disregard for all the ordinary laws. He recommended a better water supply, examination of fresh food and cemeteries outside the city limits. He was also in favour of the registration of births and deaths. Major Thornton emphasised the wisdom of calling in a doctor as soon as possible. "Those who did not get medical help suffered most," he said. "The worst doctor a man can have is himself. He may take the right thing at the wrong time."

I discovered a queer sidelight on Cape Town's attitude towards vital statistics a century ago. Incredible though it may seem, the signalman

on top of Signal Hill was expected to keep the death records. He could see the funerals in the Somerset Road cemeteries and also the Malay funeral processions near Hottentot Square (later Riebeeck Square). So he entered up each funeral in his log-book and that was the only record. Burials carried out stealthily at night were common at that period but these escaped the signalman's telescope.

Only in the eighteen-seventies did Cape Town realise that the cemeteries and unofficial burial grounds within the Municipality had become a menace to health. For decades the cemeteries had been so crowded that gravediggers were always cutting into coffins and skeletons. Scores of vaults had become a nuisance, for very few coffins were lined with lead and the

stench was dreadful. Doors collapsed or were torn down by vagrants in search of shelter and the bones of the dead were exposed. Men burrowing in the Somerset Road cemeteries were sometimes buried alive when a vault caved in; luckier ones were arrested and sent off to the treadmill.

It was claimed that most of the smallpox victims during the epidemic in the middle of last century were people who lived near the cemeteries. The worst areas was known as White Sands, close to the New Somerset Hospital. Early last century a peculiar negro sect known as the "Angolas" had started burying their dead at White Sands; then it became the place where dead horses and cattle were buried or just left to rot. People who did not belong to any congregation used White Sands

as a graveyard and the conditions there became intolerable. "The graves are dug on the Common at the pleasure of the parties who make them," reported the "Cape Argus". "The sandy soil is only three feet deep so there is not much covering on the bodies. Cattle graze among the graves." All the cemeteries, official and unofficial, were closed in 1886 and a healthier era opened with the proclamation of the Maitland cemeteries.

It was not until a few years after World War I that the Somerset Road cemeteries were finally cleared up and levelled. Official notices appeared in the newspapers inviting relatives to claim any relics they wished to remove. Many coffins and gravestones were taken away. Anatomy students claimed skeletons to which they may

or may not have been entitled. Among those buried in this area was the famous architect Louis-Michel Thibault and Herman Schutte the builder. Professor D. Bax, who searched the records kept early last century in the hope of finding Thibault's grave, thought the site was in the middle of Buitengracht Street about fifty feet from the Somerset Road corner. A picture of Thibault's tombstone is to be seen in the Cape archives but the stone has never been located. Museum directors keep in touch with builders and excavators in the hope that historic relics will come to the surface when trenches and foundations are dug. Skeletons, seventeenth and eighteenth century china and porcelain, glass bottles, coins and "post office stones" are greatly valued by museum staffs.

Those who know the gruesome story of Somerset Road and Gallows Hill are not surprised when skulls and skeletons are found in that neighbourhood by men digging foundations. I remember one skeleton that still had rusty irons round the legs. Criminals and soldiers convicted of military offences were hanged or shot and buried at the scene of execution. Petrus Borchers in his "Autobiographical Memoir" described the shooting of three army deserters at Gallows Hill during the Batavian Republic regime. One was the son of a clergyman. "His coolness when preparing to meet his fate was remarkable," Borchers wrote. "Methinks I see him yet, kneeling upon the small heap of white sand, taking off his military cap previously to being blindfolded. The native

garrison marched past the corpse, by order of the general, for example's sake."

Gallows Hill was paved with blue flagstones and there were sockets for the crossbeam from which the bodies were suspended. Then the bodies were buried on the eastern slope of the hill. I found this account of an execution in the eighteen-thirties: "On Thursday last the two brothers convicted of a series of robberies underwent the dreadful penalty of the law at the usual place of execution. They seemed resigned and patient and possessed fortitude to the last. Having shaken hands with the convicts who were placed round the gallows they joined in prayer with the clergyman. They then ascended the scaffold and while the executioner was adjusting the fatal cord

they employed their few remaining moments in warning the immense multitudes of the effects of small crimes which were sure to lead to greater. Hence the ignominious and premature death which now awaited them." About thirty years ago post office men were excavating the foundation of a telephone pole at the Gallows Hill site when they uncovered two skeletons. Perhaps they were the robbers who had rested there for a century.

When old graveyards in Cape Town are dug up, George III copper pennies are sometimes recovered. They bear the date 1797. Many of them reached the Cape during the first British occupation; they were given the value of two pence and were known as *koper dubbeltjies*. These heavy coins were placed over

the eyes of the dead to keep them shut, and some people believed they came in useful for paying Charon for the journey over the Styx.

Paarden Eiland and the area where Brooklyn now stands were scenes of a number of dramatic finds years ago when the ground was a waste of sandhills and bush. I remember visiting Ysterplaat with other reporters more than forty years ago to investigate the discovery of a burial vault after heavy rain had washed away part of the Salt River bank. Ysterplaat homestead, occupied by the Ehlers family, was the oldest building on the river. The family had never suspected the existence of the vault, but a queer story came to light as a result of the publicity. Near the vault there was a slate headstone with German lettering which read;

*Here rests in God
Friedrich Adolph Siems
Born May 23 1783
And happy in the Lord
Fell asleep March 11 1799
My first years were sixteen in
number and gave me pain and
great
suffering, therefore I forsook it
and went to eternity*

Inside the vault there were two coffins which appeared to have been smashed deliberately. Name plates had been removed but some bones were found. People living in the neighbourhood said they remembered the vault and one old man informed me that he had attended funerals in a small cemetery at that spot. It was used by the local farmers. Records at the Cape Archives were searched, and it was established that Friedrich Siems was the son of

Johan Siems, a carpenter who had arrived at the Cape as a soldier in 1775 and had been granted land on the Diep River some years afterwards. Friedrich Siems had a slave mother but in 1790 the mother and child had been freed. When the facts were published the Ehlers family remembered that two Germans had come to the farm and stated that they were searching for the graves of two German sailors who had died at the Cape in the early days. Later the Germans called again and reported that the search had been successful. The mystery of the vault and the tombstone has never been cleared up but it seems possible that the Germans removed the name plates from the coffins. Lt.-Colonel Graham Botha told me that he thought the men were tracing a line of inheritance

leading to a legacy. Friedrich Siems may have committed suicide.

Hundreds of bodies were washed up on Paarden Island after shipwrecks in Dutch East India Company days and the drowned seamen were buried there in long trenches. Hottentots who died during the smallpox epidemics were also buried there. The shores of Table Bay have revealed even more ancient skeletons. I saw one skeleton four feet six inches in height, in sitting posture, with stone implements beside it. There were the axe-heads and arrow sharpeners and grinders the little Strandloper had used in his lifetime. He had rested in a sand-dune since the late Stone Age, possibly for seven thousand years.

CHAPTER FOUR

OLD NAVAL BASE

SIMON'S BAY, that small and crowded harbour within the great arms of False Bay, has its own rich past, its own memories of ships and seamen. You may hear the clatter of Malay clogs on worn stone terraces and smell the menacing smoke of bush fires; but always in the streets of Simon's Town there is the salt air that comes in from deep waters to remind you of sailors and vanished fleets. Now and again the naval harbour gives up its secrets. Between the wars, I remember, an old residence near the Dutch Reformed Church was demolished; and then, after more than a century, the sunlight fell again on the dungeons where Mrs. Martha Hurter once kept her slaves. When the sealed rooms were opened the instruments of torture were still

there. Among the oldest houses close to the Simon's Town beach is the restored eighteenth century residence called Klein Visch Hoek and marked on the charts as "conspicuous white house." Lord Charles Somerset went fishing and hunting from this thatched and gabled house; and his son, Colonel Henry Somerset, lived there early last century. The walls are two feet thick and the kitchen chimney is one of the largest in the Cape, with an enormous bread oven. Millions of harders have been salted in oaken tubs on the beach close to the stoep. Simon's Town is full of old guns, so old that some were cast long before the Dutch settlement at the Cape. You can see the heavy Portuguese cannon bearing the royal arms and tiny swivel muzzle-loaders used by slave traders or pirates in the bows of their cutters. One retired

pirate bought a mansion at Simon's Town and lived so well there with his family that people called his home "The Palace"; hence the Palace Barracks. The bones of many slavers lie in the sands of Simon's Bay and modern divers find their keel timbers, cannon-balls and cannon. All sorts of old-fashioned nautical relics come to the surface; earthenware jars that held marmalade in Nelson's day; pots that contained "Holloway's cure for gout and rheumatism"; soft copper cartridges with heavy bullets; clay pipes by the score; brass candle-lamps and anchors with wooden stocks. Huge piles of rubbish were being thrown on to bonfires during World War II when a naval chaplain saved a pair of antique chairs from the blaze. Small brass plates were revealed when the chairs were cleaned. The chairs

had been fashioned out of oak from one of Nelson's ships and had been presented to the dockyard by the great admiral himself. Long ago I met Simon's Town people who remembered a coal hulk that was moored in the bay for many years, formerly H.M.S. *Badger*, the ten-gun brig commanded by Horatio Nelson as a young lieutenant during the blockade of the Bay of Honduras near Panama. His duty was to guard British merchant ships threatened by American privateers. Yes, the small anchorage of Simon's Bay has known great seamen.

Fishermen were the first settlers on the shores of Simon's Bay during our three centuries but they came thousands of years after primitive man. A cave in a precipice at Waterfall Kloof was inhabited by people of the Middle Stone Age. This natural

fortress, with a sheer drop of three hundred feet below the entrance, gave them a perfect sanctuary in their world of dangerous beasts. The fishermen appear to have been sent to the “Baay Fals” by the Dutch East India Company in the seventeen-thirties. A rough track was made from Kalk Bay to Simon’s Bay. Then came government buildings, the powder magazine, stores and barracks, the bakery and hospital. Stavorinus, the master mariner, described the hospital building. “One hundred patients can with ease be admitted,” he wrote. “It is built on the brow of a hill, with a triple front towards the sea. The apartments which are lofty without ceilings are very airy. In the centre is a large square court, so that the sick here have always fresh air which contributes largely to their recovery. The hospital

at Cape Town is destitute of that advantage, whence twice as many of the patients die there as here.”

Simon’s Bay had a wharf two centuries ago. Cattle grazed on Redhill and in the valleys, meat and vegetables were sent out to scurvy-ridden ships in the bay. Adriaan de Nys, ancestor of Colonel Denys Reitz, was an early *postholder*, and he kept a diary recording the weather and movements of ships. It was still a tiny settlement late in the eighteenth century, however, and Andrew Sparrman the Swedish physician remarked: “A tradesman or two have got leave to build an inn here, in which however there is not always room and conveniences sufficient to receive all such as, after a long sea voyage, are desirous of refreshing themselves on shore, the ships that land here being

chiefly such as contain not much above twenty passengers.” Sparrman said the lodging-houses kept a “tolerable good table.” A farmer named Ecksteen built a wine-house at the shore end of the wharf, the first of many. Admiral Elphinstone was horrified by the conditions on shore and reported to the Fiscal, W. S. van Ryneveld: “There is a licensed wine-house where boats are sent for water. Seamen are constantly intoxicated and commit the most unwarrantable excesses, chasing the officers ashore and alarming the inhabitants. Nine men who put off with a boat have not since been heard of; they were overcome with liquor and are supposed to have been drowned.” An early British governor recommended that a military detachment should always be stationed at Simon’s Town

“as riots and disturbances are not infrequent.” In the end Ecksteen had to move his wine-house away from the wharf.

Naval executions were carried out on board ships in Simon’s Bay at intervals of years. James Hoiman, a Royal Navy lieutenant who retired when he lost his sight, was present in H.M.S. *Tweed* in 1829 when a bo’sun was hanged for murder. A gun was fired and the murderer was hanged from the fore yardarm. There he remained for twenty minutes. The body was then lowered into a boat and taken on shore for burial.

When the Russian sloop *Diana* called at Simon’s Bay early last century Vice Admiral V. M. Golovnin recorded his impressions. He thought the farmers neglected other forms of agriculture in favour of wines and spirits; and he

praised the Constantia wine made from Persian grapes and sold in small barrels each holding five buckets. The mutton supplied to the ship was fat and tasty and far superior to the beef. Butchers prepared fine mutton hams and polonies and these kept fresh in any climate. The polonies were a foot long, one inch in diameter, made of pork and other meats and fat with various spices; they were bound in bundles of twenty-four and sewn up in airtight bladders. Admiral Golovnin also noted that seabirds were caught alive and fed on flour mixed with tepid water. After a fortnight on diet the birds lost all flavour of seaweed and fish and were ready for the table. He was assured that an albatross treated in this way became as tasty as a domestic goose. His crew salted fifty shearwaters and a few penguins. They also

found seal meat very wholesome but the admiral preferred the kidney and liver. Simon's Town people showed the Russians how to prepare *steenbras* so that it would lose its toughness and keep for some time; they marinaded the firm white flesh in vinegar, onions, garlic, pepper and saffron. The admiral had to contend with scurvy in those days and he sent his men to collect young shoots of wild asparagus on the Simon's Town hillside. Cooked with meat and rice, it served as an antidote. The Russian sailors also gathered nettles and gout-weed.

Among the Simon's Town characters early last century was Sampson Dyer, an American negro who was granted British citizenship. He arrived in a schooner from Nantucket and joined the Cloete, Reitz and Anderson whaling enterprise as a harpooner.

Then he was sent from False Bay to take charge of a seal island west of Cape Agulhas. Myriads of seals flourished on the coffin-shaped island and the seabirds darkened the sun. American sealers were raiding most of the South African islands at this period and sending the skins to China; but landing at Dyer's Island (as it was called) was so dangerous that the Americans left it to Dyer and his men. Dyer lived in a hut on the mainland opposite the island. One night he heard gunfire and rowed out to find a large vessel of the English East India Company firing the distress signals. She had sailed in among the rocks and kelp in a fog and could not find a way out. Dyer saved the ship and the captain paid the clever negro a miserable reward of one guinea.

Simon's Town in the middle of last century was still a single row of flat-roofed houses with a fort at each end. Ships of the Royal Navy went out from there to Mozambique and Mauritius, St. Helena and Sierra Leone; steam gunboats and brigs cruising in search of slavers and earning prize money. The captured Portuguese slaver Eolo was sunk next to the Admiralty pier to strengthen the pier and many other slavers were broken up on the beaches. An account of Simon's Town in 1858 says that the population of fifteen hundred was "very mixed." White people were the business men, the natives were the "coolies" or labourers. The town lived almost entirely on supplying the men-o'-war and the dockyard. There were four churches, five schools and a reading-room, but no municipality

worth mentioning. The writer suggested that this was hardly a disadvantage when one considered the “stinking drains, overcrowded houses, scarcity of water and heaving burial grounds of Cape Town.” Simon’s Town had a magistrate who was also collector of customs, and the writer evidently preferred the naval port to Cape Town. He spoke with pride of the handsome and commodious hotel with its raised stoep and billiard room. “Some people think that Simon’s Bay is not a pretty place,” he remarked. “Others again admire it. It has fine scenery, hill and water. The outline is bold as artist can desire, and the view to the eastward at sunset on a clear evening is gorgeous. The range of hills from Cape Hangklip to away beyond the Paarl show the most beautiful effects of light and shade, gold and

purple; and sunrise over the same hills is as brilliant a prospect as can well be imagined.”

Twelve oxen were needed to haul the wagons up the steep road behind the bay. “Horsemen can go up readily enough and a pleasant ride it is when you emerge on the tableland above and feel the cool air,” goes on the centuryold description I have quoted. “Staid, elderly parties have been known to frisk like kittens under its influence. Game is not abundant, but if preserved would soon become so. This narrow peninsula is shot over in season and out by people from the ships, the town and farmers who hunt for the market. The game consists of roebuck, *grysbok*, *klipspringer* and hare, a small pheasant the size of grouse, partridge, quail, snipe and wild duck.”

Malays were among the first Kaapstad people to migrate to Simon's Bay, and their descendants settled in white cottages round the Thomas Street mosque. The pioneer Malays were fishermen; then came tradesmen and craftsmen. Recently there were a thousand of them, fishermen, builders, tailors, launderers, hard-working people who preserved their religion and traditions in this sheltered corner of the Cape. Here they cut up and steamed fragrant orange and fig leaves for the feast on the Prophet's birthday. Here a learned *imaum* translated the Koran into Afrikaans; the priest who was also principal of the Malay school for several decades. Simon's Town has known fine personalities among the Malays. Hadji Bakaar Manuel used to boast that his father Tifley Manuel

had washed the clothing of three British princes during the eighteenthies. He declared that H.M.S. *Raleigh* was the favourite British man-o'-war of last century. When she paid off hundreds of Malays followed her in decorated fishing boats, shouting their farewells until she passed Roman Rock. As a boy of twelve Bakaar Manuel saw the first train steam into the small, low Simon's Town station. That was in 1890, and many people enjoyed a free ride to Glencairn stone quarry and back. They welcomed the opening of the railway as cart drivers had been charging passengers ten shillings a head for the ride from Kalk Bay to Simon's Town. Often it was easier to transport goods by sea; and old Malays have spoken to me of the cutters that sailed in with food.

Farm wagons also arrived from Stellenbosch with dried fruit. Good coffee cost sixpence a pound, sugar twopence, rice twopence half-penny. Wine was a ticky a bottle and brandy sevenpence. Each ox-wagon had to pay one shilling and twopence at the Simon's Town toll gate. There cannot be many still living who remember the toll system - or the time signals fired at five in the morning and nine at night from British men-o'-war in the bay. The early morning gun warned dockyard labourers that they would have to rise if they wished to earn their pay, half-a-crown a day. And nine o'clock was closing time in the public bars.

Malay fishermen have left their mark on the Simon's Bay maps. Certain rocks bear Malay names, Bat Besar and Bat Sattoe. Jaffer's Bay at Cole

Point was named after a famous skipper. My account of Simon's Bay a century ago describes the Malays as "muscular, long-winded oarsmen." Five or six men formed a boat's crew in those days, and when fish were plentiful each man earned from fifteen to twenty shillings a day. They worked from five to noon as a rule and basked in the sun for the rest of the day. Stumpnose, roman and seventy-four, rare in Table Bay, were among the main catches of the Simon's Town fishermen. "Quantities of mullet are captured in the course of the year," says the writer. "They are a small fish, something like the herring in appearance, but do not come near them in flavour. They are a great addition to the breakfast table, but it would be sacrilege to mention them in the same breath as a Loch Fyne herring or a

salmon trout. It is great fun to see a net hauled in and the different fish jumping and gleaming; the silvery mullet and the zebra-like stripes and hues of others contrasting with the bright vermilion of the stumpnose or the deeper red of the roman.”

Hauls worth up to two hundred pounds were made at that period. Mullet were salted and sold to the farmers at three pounds a thousand to feed their labourers. Oysters were punched off the rocks with crowbars at low water. Crawfish were far more common than they are today. Strange to say, this writer does not mention the snoek that gave Simon's Town the nickname of “Snoekie”.

Malays manned some of the open boats that hunted whales in those waters. It was often a dangerous game, the sport of heroes, for the old hand-

flung harpoons never killed the whale. The boat approached the palpitating black mountain cautiously. When the sharp iron entered the flesh the whale usually made off, towing the boat. Sometimes it lashed out and then the boat was smashed and the crew would have to be rescued. When the whale streaked off, mad with pain, the skipper let the harpoon line run free, then made fast and allowed the whale to tow the boat. Scores of people raced along the waterfront to watch the drama. Sometimes the whale headed for open sea and at last the harpooner would have to make a hard decision and cut the rope. But if the whale lost blood and became tired the boat would creep in and the harpooner would stand in the bows with lance poised. One shrewd thrust would finish the whale. Hundreds of people then

assembled on Long Beach to see the blubber go into the cauldrons. Once there was a skipper named Abdol Clark who came alongside a right whale with calf, lost his head and lanced the calf. The mother whale dived to lift the calf, found it was dead and attacked the boat in a frenzy. The crew tried to go astern but the whale took the bows in her mouth and tore the whole forward part of the boat away. Those men were in the water for two hours before Hablutzel came out in his whaler *Sea Queen* and rescued them.

Sharks have found human victims in Simon's Bay, but the shark episode that lingers in my mind was an escape. I was sailing in those waters at the time, May 1922, but never did I dare to plunge into the warm anchorage. A young man named E. G. Pells took the

risk, however, and struck out with the idea of swimming round the training ship *General Botha*. He was half way to the ship when he felt a swirl of water and then a shock as though a torpedo had collided with him. Pells realised at once that it was a shark. Next moment the rows of teeth were tearing at his back and left thigh. Then the shark moved downwards, carrying Pells with him.

Pells fought hard and tore himself free. He was about fifteen feet below the surface and he could see the dark shape looming beside him. In spite of pain and shock he kept his head. His main fear at this point was that he would be unable to hold his breath long enough, for his lungs were almost bursting. At last the green light changed to sunshine. Pells saw white foam and his own blood on the surface

- and a small rowing boat with three elderly Malays on board. The Malays had observed the attack and were hauling up their anchor, a large stone on a rope. Pells swam weakly towards the boat and clung to the side. As the Malays were dragging him on board the shark raced up. Pells always remembered the look of horror on the faces of the Malays as they saw this ferocious enemy. It seemed that the boat would be upset but the shark moved away. Within minutes Pells was on the wharf. Very soon he found himself on the operating table with the district surgeon attending to his dreadful wounds.

Pells told me that the shark must have been a coward. It had failed to kill one who had proved that he was ready to defend himself. Soon after this encounter the Simon's Town port

officer caught a shark with a leg of pork, a strong hook, steel drum and steel hawser. The jaws of the shark fitted the scars on the body of Pells. Teeth in the lower jaw corresponded exactly with the shape of the injuries. The shark was twelve feet long with a girth of nine feet.

Simon's Bay has known many famous seamarks, old ships that seemed over the decades to have become fixtures. Then at last they were taken out and sunk - and almost forgotten. In the days of Rudyard Kipling there were the gunboats *Gadfly*, *Griper* and *Tickler* and the corvette *Penelope*; and they were succeeded in the historic seascape by the training ship *General Botha*, formerly H.M.S. *Thames*. I met this antiquated cruiser on a grey afternoon in March 1921 at the end of her last voyage, when she

came wearily alongside the quay in Simon's Town dockyard. She looked battered and tired of the oceans she had been riding for nearly forty years. The men and boys on board were even more exhausted. Captain F. B. Renouf, the old sailing ship master who commanded her, told me the story of that strange ordeal.

Renouf had taken charge of the three thousand ton ship at Sheerness. Two experienced deck officers and twenty-four raw little sea cadets were on board. The hull was covered with barnacles and she moved so slowly that she had to go into drydock for cleaning. Her war service as a submarine depot ship had left her in an unseaworthy condition. "I could have swum as fast as she travelled with steam in only two boilers," remarked Captain Renouf bitterly.

However, two more boilers were repaired. Engineers, seamen, firemen and stewards were signed on and one thousand tons of coal were taken on board. Lloyd's surveyor shook his head over a large workshop on the main deck and told Renouf that he would have to nurse the ship in heavy weather as her stability might be affected. Early in January the *General Botha* steamed out of the Thames and worked up to her top speed – six knots. Very soon the worried captain decided that he would have to put into Plymouth.

When the dismantled cruiser passed Plymouth breakwater in the darkness the naval authorities looked upon her as a ghost ship. They were not expecting her and a pinnace was sent to investigate. After some delay the *General Botha* sailed again with six

extra firemen and another boiler in action. She had been designed for a full speed of seventeen knots. Renouf hoped to make seven knots on the passage to the Cape. In the Channel, however, he had to heave-to. When the four-inch guns had been removed the open spaces in the sides, like bay windows, had been boarded up with strong deal. Heavy seas smashed the timber, main decks were flooded and water swept below. Dynamos were damaged by salt water; coal and stores on deck went over the side; the stern gallery (like a verandah outside the captain's quarters) was swept away. Large stern windows were smashed. All they could do was to close the doors and hope for the best when she pitched violently and put her poop under water. Captain Renouf had his wife

and five-year-old daughter on board. His wife's cabin was flooded and many of their possessions were lost. The cadets were kept baling day and night and though they behaved well many of them were sorry they had come to sea.

At eight in the morning Captain Renouf was on the bridge when he saw an enormous sea approaching. He estimated the height at thirty feet. "You know, captain, the lower drawer in my cabin chest is full of water," remarked the second mate at this moment. "Here comes a sea that will fill your bunk as well," Renouf replied grimly. As the sea hit the ship the old cruiser put her bows right into it. The sea broke solid over the foredeck, rolled like surf across a beach, over the bridge and round the funnel and then swept the quarterdeck. That was the

greatest sea of the whole voyage. It carried away the last of the deck-load of coal and Captain Renouf decided to put back to Plymouth for repairs. He was hoping that the deck workshop with its lathes and heavy machinery would be swept overboard before they arrived.

When they anchored Captain Renouf discovered that his wife had lost nearly all her clothes. A large oak sideboard, wine locker and the wardroom silver had vanished through the opening in the stern. Mrs. Renouf had to go on shore in her slippers. They sailed again after eighteen days in harbour. Off Lisbon the rudder-head glands jammed and by the time the engineers had made repairs they needed double, tons of rum. Coal became the captain's main worry, and when he reached St. Vincent in the Cape Verdes he learnt

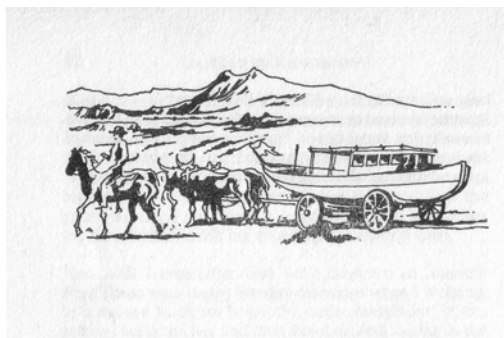
to his astonishment that he had only three hundred tons in the bunkers. He took on more than six hundred tons at a high price.

Now the weather was fine and all went well until a steward rushed into the wardroom one night while dinner was being served and shouted: "I've seen a ghost. There's a ghost in naval officer's uniform bending over the dynamos." Others reported the ghost in various parts of the ship from time to time. Nevertheless the *General Botha* reached Simon's Bay thirty-eight days out from Plymouth without further trouble. All those who had brought her to South Africa left her for good, but the ghost remained on board, a legend that died only when the *General Botha* left her moorings for the last time.

How well I remember that old anchorage in Simon's Bay! Those were happy Sunday mornings when I woke up in a canvas berth on board the cutter *Innisfallen*, lit the primus, made the tea, and then stood on deck taking in the great sweep of land and water. There in the sunlight slumbered old Simon's Town with its Martello towers and solid masonry, its sea walls and slate roofs, its balconied British Hotel, its memories of sail and powder. I remembered the ships I had seen there. One has remained in my mind over the years even more firmly than those I joined as a reporter for manoeuvres or voyages. She was H.M.S. *Dwarf*, a famous little gunboat that patrolled for many years in West African waters. With her white hull, grey upperworks and yellow funnel she made a romantic picture;

but her officers told a different story. She was really a river gunboat built for the Yang-tse-Kiang, and at sea she rolled so heavily that newly-joined ratings expected her to capsize. Hard to steer, difficult to handle, the *Dwarf* was not the most popular ship in the navy. She was only seven hundred tons, a lieutenant's command, with a number of Kroomen from Freetown in her company. One *officer* described her as a "hot floating tin kettle", and complained that turtle (from Ascension) was often on the menu when there was no butter in the storeroom. Men who sailed in the *Dwarf* suffered from malaria and "yellow jack"; they endured the fogs of South West Africa and the tornadoes of Benin. More fortunate naval officers rode and played civilised games; the "Dwarfs" hunted goats on St. Helena and caught

sharks at Fernando Po. Yet that was the ship in which I would gladly have sailed away from Simon's Bay, bound for the South Atlantic isles and the swamps and forests and long beaches of sweltering West Africa. Everyone has his own ideas of adventure. Simon's Bay aroused my imagination long ago and sent me off at last in the seatracks of the Dwarf.



CHAPTER FIVE HARBOURS ON THE VELD

SOUTHERN AFRICA, with its great irrigation dams and other sheets of water, has many inland fleets nowadays and harbours on the veld. But when you left the ocean a century ago the sight of even a small craft was a rarity. Rivers had not been surveyed and the Orange River had long unexplored stretches. Thus only the

boldest and most enterprising men considered the possibility of navigating the interior waterways. It was a dubious sort of investment. Ship-builders, usually in Britain, had to build these vessels in pieces, assemble and number them and then take the vessel apart and crate the pieces for shipment. Dubious and expensive. The parts often had to be carried inland on wagons or by native bearers and the loss of a few parts caused long delays.

Mr. John Owen Smith, one of the Namaqualand copper pioneers, owner of the Jessie Smith mine at Kodas in the Richtersveld, decided to avoid all this bother. He secured plans for a small but seaworthy steamer which could reach the Orange River mouth from England under her own power. She would slip into the river during the flood season when the mouth was

open, steam up to a point on the south bank near the Kodas mine, take on her cargo of copper ore and deliver it in Table Bay. He had already shipped ore from Alexander Bay; and it was reported that the mine was yielding from forty-five to seventy-five percent pure copper near the surface. "Mr. Smith is very sanguine and will not desist from operations before, by actual results favourable or unfavourable, he has satisfied himself and the public whether or not the mines in that quarter will pay," reported the "Eastern Province Herald". That was in 1854.

Sir James Alexander, the explorer, had visited the Orange River mouth about eighteen years previously and had given a glowing account of the lower river. "It is difficult to speak of the Gariep (the Hottentot name for the

Orange) otherwise than in the most enthusiastic terms," Alexander wrote. "Besides its beautiful African features its utility is very great. To the wandering tribes dwelling near it affords an unfailing refuge in seasons of drought and famine. I found great store of iron and copper ores. But there may be even more precious metals, gold and silver. I saw no rocks or dangers at the mouth. With care, it seemed that the mouth of the river could be entered by a schooner." Smith was probably also influenced by a much later report by Charles Bell, surveyor-general of the Cape Colony. "A minute examination as to the practicability of navigating the Orange River should be made," Bell wrote. "I can hear of no insuperable difficulty in the way, at least during the floods, if

the ore be heaped on its banks and shipped when opportunity offers.”

So the eager Smith paid for his steamer. Only after it had been launched did he learn. that nothing larger than a rowing boat could venture across the bar into the Orange River.

Jules Verne, a pioneer of a different sort, the first popular-writer of science fiction heard of Smith’s scheme but not the unhappy sequel. He wrote a novel called “Meridiana” based on a voyage up the Orange River by three Englishmen and three Russians, all astronomers, in the steamer *Queen and Czar*. They were accompanied by a faithful, noble Bushman who spoke the polished English of a professor and assured the scientists that the river was navigable. Jules Verne’s ship crossed Southern Africa

safely. John Owen Smith lost his money. There is a harbour near the Orange River mouth today, but only for yachts and other small craft.

Thirty years after Smith’s disastrous venture there arrived in the Cape a determined Scot named John Thorburn. He made a small fortune on the Kimberley diamond diggings in the eighteen-seventies. Then in 1880 he settled down to an occupation which he regarded as less precarious; that of a storekeeper on the Vaal River bank near Kimberley. He was doing well, but the Vaal rose unexpectedly, sweeping away house and stock. Thorburn and his wife lost everything. They had to borrow clothes before leaving for Kimberley. There he bought fresh stock and opened another store on higher ground.

The swollen river had given Thorburn an idea. Old residents assured him that the river was navigable every winter and Thorburn decided to order a steamer to bring coal from the mines on the upper Vaal to supply the river diggings and Kimberley. The distance was one hundred and eighty miles. Water transport would obviously work out much cheaper than ox-wagons. Thorburn was an enthusiast and a man of great determination, but he lacked the vein of caution necessary in such an enterprise. First he ordered his steamer, a twin-screw vessel to be built of steel. She was only thirty-seven feet overall, with a beam of eight feet six inches and draught of twentytwo inches; but he specified towing-gear which would enable the steamer to bring with her

a barge loaded with three hundred bags of coal. Edwards and Symes of London started building the steamer after Thorburn had paid a deposit of one thousand pounds. Meanwhile Thorburn secured permission from the Transvaal and Orange Free State governments to clear the Vaal River for navigation. He built the barge himself. Then he spent three years removing obstructions in the rivers; trees, boulders, anything that might impede the progress of his steamer and barge.

At last the great day arrived when Thorburn heard that his little steamer had reached Hopetown, then the railway terminus. It had been shipped in crates. Thorburn assembled the vessel at his harbour on the Vaal and launched her. She behaved well, the engines ran sweetly; but Thorburn

soon made the tragic discovery that the Vaal was navigable only over short distances. New sandbanks had formed and it was impossible to reach the coal mines. Thorburn had spent four thousand pounds on the venture and he was unwilling to let his ship rust on the river diggings. He loaded it on to ox-wagons, trekked to Potchefstroom and launched her again in the hope that people there would take river excursions. Unfortunately they soon tired of this amusement. Thorburn looked round for another way of making a fortune as a shipowner. Someone advised him to take his steamer to Delagoa Bay and carry freight along the Tembe River. So he named his steamer *Tembe*, loaded her on a huge ox-wagon, put the engine and other parts on another wagon and set out for the sea. A trek of nearly two

thousand miles lay before him. He was menaced by grass fires and the wagons were stuck so often that he felt like abandoning the *Tembe* in the bush. Near the headwaters of the Vaal River, seven thousand feet above sea level, the large wagon fell over and the *Tembe* was almost wrecked on dry land. One side was smashed, the hull was knocked out of shape, rivets were drawn, an iron bulkhead doubled up and the cabin-fittings were splintered and used on the camp-fire. "I felt quite beaten," Thorburn confessed. Nevertheless he repaired the *Tembe* and went on and launched her in salt water at Tembe drift.

Thorburn had sent for his wife and family, and now he steamed down the river in triumph. "A sultry hot day, the monkeys jabbering, the parrots squeaking," Thorburn recalled.

“Away she went like a duck. At the sound of the steam-whistle the monkeys went screeching and scrambling through the forest. But our speed of seven knots was too fast and we ran into the jungle and carried away the funnel.” However, the *Tembe* reached Delagoa Bay safely. Sometimes she carried freight to Swaziland; often she was chartered for pleasure trips. Thorburn shot hippo in the swamps, towed lighters and made another small fortune. His little *Tembe* was still at work in those waters in 1908 when Thorburn died.

I can remember the Vaal River vessel known for years as the “Barkly West battleship”. She was launched by an optimist named George Beaumont just before the end of last century: a huge dredger, one hundred feet long,

thirty-six feet wide, looking rather like a battleship with her massive steel mast and conning-tower, with projecting tubes like guns.

Beaumont was a civil engineer who had dredged for alluvial gold successfully in South American rivers. He dug for diamonds below the Barkly West bridge; and there he stared into the large deep pool and saw visions. Surely it would be possible to dredge up the diamondiferous gravel and make a huge fortune?

Beaumont and his partners had to pay about thirty thousand pounds to get the dredger to Barkly West. Wagon after wagon arrived, loaded with huge steel plates, cranes, engines, 4 sorts of machinery and anchors. Workmen arrived from Britain and assembled the dredger on

the river bank. She was launched with champagne at a party which those present remembered for the rest of their lives. Unfortunately the rocky formation of the riverbed defeated the expensive machinery on board the dredger. The scoops failed to raise the hard masses of conglomerated alluvial gravel. Beaumont's diver went down and confirmed the disastrous situation. This was not a pool for conveyor-buckets.

Shortly before World War I the Vaal River "battleship" was sold to an Indian and dismantled. The engines were used elsewhere on the river for a "breakwater" scheme. The great pool where Beaumont's "battleship" lay at anchor for years has yielded a fortune in diamonds since then, but they were not recovered by dredging.

Beyond the Limpopo, of course, there are large fleets and well-equipped harbours far from the smell of salt ocean. Along the two thousand miles of the Zambesi all sorts of craft are to be found. It was on a remote stretch of this river that a retired officer of the Royal Navy put the crews of his power barges into uniform worn by British seamen, traditional collars, bell-bottoms and all.

Only in recent years has a paddle steamer appeared in the waters above the Victoria Falls. She is the *Chobe Belle* and her harbour is at Kasane on the Chobe River. She was built by Colonel Charles Trevor, proprietor of the Chobe River Hotel, to carry passengers along the interesting stretches of lagoon and river where four territories meet: Bechuanaland,

the Caprivi Strip, Rhodesia and Zambia.

Steamers have navigated the lower Zambesi for more than a century. Rhodesia set up a naval base at Katsanya, twenty-six miles east of Tete, many years ago and put a fast launch on the river. H.M.S. *Harari*, as she was called, was built at Durban to a special design which enabled her to use the river from the sea to Kabarabasa rapids at all seasons. The *Harari* was painted battleship grey. Her duty was to protect native labourers travelling home with their earnings. Before the *Harari* arrived there were pirates on the river and many natives were robbed and murdered.

Tete is the oldest town in Southern Africa and it was an important river harbour for decades before the

opening in 1949 of the railway to Moatize close by. Stern-wheelers loaded at Chinde and steamed up the Zambesi for four hundred miles to Tete. David Livingstone started the traffic with his steam pinnace *Ma Robert*, a spectacle that almost frightened the primitive river people out of their wits. Then came fleets of stern-wheelers owned by sugar and railway companies. They carried the trade goods of Europe up-country and returned with coal and sugar, grain and rice, cotton, cattle, sisal, copra and ivory.

Tanganyika, the largest lake in the world, has several modern harbours. One named Mpulungu was the spot in the present Zambia where Livingstone set eyes on the lake for the first time. Here you may see all sorts of craft from dugout canoes,

dhow and trimarans to steamers capable of voyaging round the world. Mpulungu has a proper quay, cargo sheds, customs and immigration offices, police and a cold storage plant for fish.

I sailed from Mpulungu in the S.S. *Liemba* to another lake harbour, Kigoma. This is the main port on the eastern shore of the lake; a pretty harbour with a horseshoe of hills. Kigoma has replaced Ujiji, five miles away, as a port, but Ujiji has a huge population and various claims to fame and notoriety. It ceased to be a port when the level of Lake Tanganyika fell and left Ujiji high and dry. Across the lake at Albertville the Belgians launched some fine steamers, the *Baron Dhanis* and *Cuc de Brabant*; but most of their

grand fleet ran on the Congo and its tributaries.

Ah, the Congo! I have some pleasant memories of the river harbours of that equatorial basin. Belgian steamers built in Antwerp had to last a long time on the river. One passenger vessel, the *Flandre*, was launched early this century and remained in service for fifty years. Missionaries had their own little ships. Stern-wheelers were sent from the Mississippi to the Congo. One tug called *Kalina* was a typical two-funnelled Rhine paddleboat. The *Kigonaa*, a large passenger steamer which I knew best of all, was built in 1915 and was still in service as a training vessel half a century later. American landing craft reached the Congo after World War II for use as pusher tugs on the main river cargo

routes. No longer do the passenger and freight services run to schedule but there are still many splendid vessels on the river.

CHAPTER SIX
ALOE AND OYSTERS

*Six oceans had their will of us
To carry all away -
Our galley's in the Baltic,
And our boom's in Mossel Bay!*

RUDYARD KIPLING. "The
Merchantmen"

KIPLING'S SHIP was lucky to have lost nothing more than her boom in Mossel Bay. This sandy curve in the coast behind Cape St. Blaize was a dangerous summer anchorage before the harbour was built. It has known many shipwrecks, many sea dramas since the day when the first white explorer Bartholomew Diaz stepped on shore there and named it Baia dos Vaqueiros, the "bay of herdsmen". This was the first landing place of

the Portuguese explorers in South Africa. (Cape Cross, where Diego Cam landed in 1486, is in South West Africa). Portuguese mariners were calling regularly at Mossel Bay years before they discovered Table Bay.

I can almost smell the fumes of boiling aloe juice when I think of Mossel Bay for this is the land of *Aloe ferox* and the old industry that gives the world a favourite purgative. Perhaps it is better to recall the other celebrated speciality of Mossel Bay, man's oldest food, the oyster. My earliest memory of the bay, however, was rather different; an experience which would make me unpopular in the town if I dwelt upon it with too much emphasis. I was on board a coasting steamer at anchor. The master was on shore. Several young

members of the crew decided to swim from the gangway and I joined them in the water. Soon I noticed that men on deck were putting down a barrage of lumps of coal, keeping the sharks at bay. I swam for the gangway and dared not bathe again. To this day I cannot tell you whether the sharks were man-eaters. I thought of the episode not long ago, however, when a surfer at Mossel Bay was attacked by "a seal or a shark". He escaped with a severed artery near the toes. Mossel Bay is really as safe as Muizenberg but there is no harbour in South Africa which is not visited by man-eating sharks on rare occasions. An entry in the Mossel Bay records long ago read as follows: "Sharks very bold. Anderson harpoons one eleven feet long."

However, there would be no sharks' fin soup on the menu if I planned a typical Mossel Bay meal. I would start with oysters, of course, as visitors have done for centuries. Not the giant oysters but the smaller, narrow ones. And I would eat them raw; cold and fresh from the dripping hand of the sea; without red pepper or tabasco or vinegar and only an occasional drop of lemon juice. When I first stayed at a Mossel Bay hotel there was an Italian chef named Luigi who was a great man for cooking oysters. He knew that Escofier disapproved of heating oysters; but he said that when people could have oysters by the hundred every day at low prices they demanded a change from the untouched oyster, even though the wild and

HARBOURS OF MEMORY



"When I first stayed at a Mossel Bay hotel there was an Italian chef named Luigi who was a great man for cooking oysters."

inimitable tang of the living oyster was lost. So he served “pigs in blankets” (oysters wrapped in bacon and fried) or oysters *au gratin*, sole and oyster pie, oysters sweated in butter and served on hot fried bread, oyster souffles, oysters with spinach, grilled oysters and fried oysters chopped and mixed with scrambled eggs. All very interesting and I must say that Luigi’s oyster sauce for roast mutton was a masterpiece. But I am still with Excoffier, whose words should be remembered by every oyster-eater: “Oysters are the dish par excellence; their delicacy satisfies the most fastidious of epicures and they are so easily digested that the most delicate invalid can partake of them freely. The real and best way of serving

oysters is to send them to the table raw.”

Now for the soup. Luigi was a grand soup hand and his kitchen gave off many nostalgic and old-fashioned aromas. He could turn out a thick pea soup such as good ships’ cooks simmer; his *zuppa di pesce* was a work of art worthy of a Neopolitan restaurant; and his strong meat soups were memorable. Luigi also had in his repertoire a Mossel Bay soup which he made at my request. The main ingredient was the fine avocado pear grown in the Little Brak Valley; an avocado puree flavoured with brandy, mustard, salt, lemon juice and Worcestershire sauce.

Fish is easy at Mossel Bay and I would select the local sole, fresh or smoked. But you could have snoek or geelbek, kabeljou, leervis or galjoen.

The main course I would set before you would be that which a bygone Cape governor, Sir Walter Hely-Hutchinson, enjoyed to the full when he arrived unexpectedly at the farm Kleinberg many years ago. "Ouma Kleinberg" (Mrs. Muller) had a splendid *kerrie-afval*, curried sheep's tripe, on the stove that day. Some of the local coriander had gone into the curry; a carminative with a pleasant aroma. The governor ate his curry with sweet potatoes and stamped mealies and came back for more.

Dessert? In the Mossel Bay district you will find the largest privately-owned custard apple farm in the southern hemisphere. Here, within a mile of the sea, grow those expensive and exotic fruits with yellow pulp like custard. Luigi made use of two other local delicacies with his puddings.

One was protea nectar, gathered when the *Protea millifera* was in flower; a rare syrup nowadays, rare and delectable. The other, believe it or not, was a jam made from the bitter leaves of the *Aloe ferox*, the red-hot pokers that flourish on the Mossel Bay veld. Luigi peeled and sliced the fleshy leaves, soaked them in lime water and boiled them with sugar and lemon juice. When he could secure green shoots from a fig tree in spring he used them as a flavouring. Aloe *konfyt* reminded me of its watermelon counterpart.

Probably the first meal eaten by white people at Mossel Bay consisted of mutton. As you know, Vasco da Gama put in there with his fleet in the summer of 1497 and gave the Hottentots small bells and other trinkets in exchange for sheep. The explorers remained at anchor in the

bay for about twelve days, so there may have been a *braaivleis* (or Portuguese *asado*) beside the stream or under the milkwood tree. However, there are other possibilities. Vasco da Gama's men caught fish and penguins and clubbed seals on the return voyage and all these foods were salted. The explorers listened to the reed flutes of the Hottentots and a Portuguese musician recorded the tune with its range of three notes. Thanks to that written fragment of history, members of a fairly recent Kalahari expedition were able to identify the same flutes and the identical tune played by Hottentots in the desert.

Pedro Alvarez Cabral called at Mossel Bay a few years after Vasco da Gama; his first landing after discovering Brazil. Cabral put into

Mossel Bay again on his return from India. He hung a shoe from a branch of the milkwood tree, with a letter which was found by Juan de Nova not long 'afterwards. Juan de Nova built a little stone church there, the first place of Christian worship in South Africa. The ruins of that church, parts of the walls and timbering and the flagstone floor, were still to be seen in the eighteenth-seventies. There was no Historic Monuments Commission to save the church and it was demolished. According to local legend the stone was used for another building in the town, a new warehouse, but it cannot be traced now. A few pieces of tough green heart timber and some square-headed, hand-forged Portuguese nails have been preserved, the only fragments of the little church.

However, there are a few other relics of the Portuguese period, when Mossel Bay was more important than Table Bay. Portions of two engraved stones were found during the demolition of an old government building early this century. One showed a cannon and this stone disappeared mysteriously. The other remnant is to be seen in the South African Museum. Experts have found the mutilated inscription very baffling, but it was in all probability a “post office stone” left there in 1501 by Juan de Nova.

Vasco da Gama set up a stone pillar or *padrao* with the Portuguese coat-of-arms; and several historians have stated without authority that this was placed on the site of the present lighthouse. This pillar and a wooden cross made from a spar were thrown

down by the Hottentots while Vasco da Gama was still in the bay and no fragment of these monuments has ever been found. Dr. Erik Axelsson, leading modern authority on the Portuguese explorers, searched for the Vasco da Gama *padrao* some years ago. He had been successful in discovering *padrao* fragments at other points along the South African coast, but the Mossel Bay *padrao* defeated him. Dr. Axelsson felt sure that the Portuguese would not have carried a stone cross weighing one thousand pounds to the summit of Cape St. Blaize. He selected a rocky knoll to the south of the old watering place for his search. According to the “Cambridge History of the British Empire” the cross was set up on Seal Island at Mossel Bay. Dr. Axelsson has found evidence proving that this could not have been the site and he thinks

that pieces of the *padrao* may still be found somewhere in the vicinity of the milkwood tree. After deep research in the Lisbon archives and elsewhere Dr. Axelson has corrected a number of statements by earlier historians. He has shown that the Bahia San Bras of the Portuguese records was not Mossel Bay but the modern Fish Bay to the west of Cape St. Blaize.

Mossel Bay gave up a very old anchor about sixty years ago and the design suggests that it was lost by one of the early Portuguese ships. It has been placed in the park. An egg-shaped vase, found in a cave by a Mr. Meyer under eight feet of bat guano, may also be a relic of the Portuguese visitors. Mr. Meyer sent it to the South African Museum. It would hold about two gallons.

Fortunately the white milkwood tree described by the Portuguese has survived the centuries and is now much larger than it was when the explorers landed. This species, *Sideroxylon Inerme* L., known in Afrikaans as *melkhout* or *jakkalsbessie*, is a low, compact evergreen tree that loves the beaches and does not suffer from salt spray. Dark green leaves provide deep shade for men and animals. The berries have an unpleasant flavour but they are eaten by birds. Grazing animals will not touch the foliage and Marloth was puzzled when he learned that milk from cows sheltering in these groves had the odour of the flowers. He discovered that the milk had been tainted by pollen. The specimen at Mossel Bay is now about twenty-two feet high with a spread more than fifty feet in diameter.

It must be approaching five hundred years of age and it should last another five hundred. Milkwood timber has been used for fencing and boat-building but this historic tree will not be cut down. It is surrounded by chains. Two old ships' cannon of unknown origin lie in the enclosure. The official notice reads as follows:

POST OFFICE TREE

So far back as A.D. 1500 Pedro de Ataide placed in this tree a letter containing a record of a disaster to a Portuguese fleet en route for India. This letter was found by Joas de Nova who had put in with his ship to Mossel Bay for water. De Nova built a hermitage within a few yards of this tree close to which was a spring of water.

First of the Mossel Bay coast shipwrecks occurred in 1504 when a fleet under Lopo Soares sailed past Cape St. Blaize and one ship ran ashore in the night. Pedro de Mendonca was the captain. The wreck was sighted in the breakers at dawn but it was impossible to help the crew and the fleet sailed on. A year later Cid Barbudo put into Mossel Bay and landed two *degredados* or convicts to search the coast for survivors. They returned after three days, stripped by the Hottentots, and reported that they had found a ship's mast and a skeleton. It appeared that the Hottentots had set fire to the wreck to secure the metal. The crew must have been massacred.

An official Mossel Bay guide states that Santos Beach was named after a Portuguese ship lost there in the early

days. In fact the name is much more recent. The *Santos* was a small German schooner which was at anchor in the bay on a fine day in July 1874 when a heavy swell set in from the south-east. The master was on shore and the mate was ill. Soon the *Santos* was dragging her anchor and moving towards the head of the bay. Distress signals were seen and the captain offered a large amount of money to anyone who would row him out to his ship; but no one was prepared to risk his life. Then the anchor chain parted and the crew of the *Santos* made sail in an effort to beat out of the bay. Too late. The ship would not answer her helm and she grounded between two reefs. The rocket apparatus failed to reach her but a rope was floated ashore and the crew reached safety by means of a "traveller". Mr. A. B. Munro

bought the wreck for one hundred pounds. Cargo and tackle fetched another three hundred pounds. The people who watched that drama have all passed on and the *Santos* has been forgotten.

The British three-masted schooner *Rosebud* broke adrift during a gale in Mossel Bay during the eighteen-eighties and became a total loss. The beach where she broke up was known for years as Rosebud Beach; then the name was changed to Pansy Beach on account of the rare and lovely pansy shells found there. Before the century ended another schooner, the *Sea Gull*, had been wrecked in Mossel Bay. First of the wrecks this century was the barque *Poseidon* in August 1902. Two months later there occurred one of the strangest and most costly wrecks ever known on the Mossel Bay coast.

Durban harbour authorities had ordered a huge floating dock, nearly four hundred feet long with a beam of eighty feet; a dock capable of lifting ships weighing more than four thousand tons. The dock was towed from the Tyne by the steamer *Baralong* and she rounded the Cape safely. In a tremendous gale off Cape St. Blaize, however, the towing hawser snapped and the Baralong was unable to save the floating dock. Captain Dryden, the Mossel Bay harbour master put out in the small tug *Morning Star*, but the seas were running high and the tug had to return to shelter. Dryden tried again with a larger vessel, the steam trawler *Undine*, but the dock was close inshore now and had to be left to her fate. The dock was lifted so far up on the beach that the men on board were

able to walk on shore. You can still see a rusting shape at Glentana. Iron railings outside the Anglican cathedral at George and a flight of iron steps outside a house in York Street are relics of the wreck. The dock had been insured for £72,000 and the towing fee was £8,000. Durban had to order a new floating dock.

Last of the Mossel Bay wrecks occurred during a southeast gale in November 1903. Rain fell in torrents, houses were flooded. The Norwegian sailing ship *King Cenric* had two anchors down but both cables parted and the ship took the ground. All hands were rescued by the rocket brigade. The steam trawler *Thrasher* was lost on the rocks that day. Six ships were wrecked in Algoa Bay during the same gale.

Portugal dominated the Mossel Bay scene during the sixteenth century. Manuel de Perestrello, navigator and author, left this record of his visit: "At this bay, upon the top point of the cape, I left fixed a wooden cross and fastened to it with brass wire a tube enclosed with cork and wax within which was a document as follows: 'In praise of our Lord Jesus Christ and exaltation of His holy faith and for the service and enlargement of the kingdoms and states of Dom Sebastian, the most serene King of Portugal, Manuel Mesquita de Perestrello who by his command came to explore this coast. Placed here on seventh January 1576'." No trace of this cross or document has ever been found.

Only towards the end of the sixteenth century did the first Dutch ships

enter Mossel Bay. Captain Jan de Molinaar noted that the natives "seemed savage yet friendly to us". He bartered oxen and sheep for old iron. Early in the seventeenth century the Dutch commander Paulus van Caerden anchored in the bay on his way back from India. He took twenty of his men on shore with him from the *Hof van Holland* and complained that he could only get oysters when he wanted fresh meat. Van Caerden was responsible for changing the Portuguese name to Mossel Bay. Nearly seven decades passed before the Dutch thought of exploring the Mossel Bay hinterland. Then a party under Jeronimus Cruse were put on shore and they marched through unknown country to Table Bay, discovering the Attaquas tribe of Hottentots on the way.

Jan de la Fontaine was the first Cape governor to visit Mossel Bay and in the seventeen-thirties he put up a beacon with the VOC emblem to establish ownership. Cattle farmers had already settled in the district. Ignatius Ferreira, a Portuguese who had been wrecked in Table Bay, settled at Mossel Bay some years afterwards and became field cornet. The old house with yellowwood floors near Brandwacht where he lived is still there. Another old farm is Geelbeksvlei, owned by the Meyers in the eighteenth century and afterwards. When a ship was lost in Mossel Bay in the seventeen-thirties Esias Meyer rode to the Castle with the news. He took seven days, changing horses fifteen times. For this service he was granted land in freehold.

Mossel Bay saw an impressive cavalcade in the seventeen-sixties when Jan Willem Cloppenburg, Fiscal at the Cape, arrived with a coach, army wagon, horses and a retinue of servants. Cloppenburg wrote a long report describing the Hottentots he met. There is a mountain ten miles north of Mossel Bay called Bottelierskop, and Cloppenburg included in his report this rather puzzling reference to the origin of the name. "By the Klein Brak River is a little mountain called the Botteliersmutje (steward's cap) which name was very obviously given to it by seventeen sailors of the *Huis Marquette* that lay in Mossel Bay some time ago. With the wife of a certain burgher Jacobus they diverted themselves in a cave nearby that is now named the 'Chamber of

Seventeen’.” Possibly the *bottelier* (ship’s victualler) had some part in the affair.

Mossel Bay was on the route of a number of those famous old travellers, botanists and others, who enriched South African literature with their scholarly observations. Carl Thunberg the Swede stayed on the farm of Dirk Marcus, a great elephant hunter, in the seventeen-seventies; and soon afterwards came Dr. Andrew Sparrman, another Swede, on horseback. Le Vaillant the Frenchman visited the bay at the same period and smacked his lips over the oysters. Hyenas disturbed his oxen at night and he had to light fires. He exchanged tobacco for mats at a Hottentot kraal. Pelicans and flamingoes were seen in thousands. “A number of good habitations are

scattered about the adjoining country,” noted Le Vaillant.

A large granary was built by the Dutch towards the end of the eighteenth century, for the policy was to encourage wheat production in the district. Leading farmers of the period were Jan and Nicolaas Meyer, J. Pienaar, M. le Grange, A. Barnard, H. Heyns, Rademeyer, Botha and Wiese. The granary cost nearly a thousand pounds. Another store intended for timber cost slightly more. It was one hundred and fifty feet long and twenty feet wide. Stone walls were two feet thick. Yellowwood was brought from the Outeniqua forests for the floors. Mr. Colin Graham Botha, the archivist, found the walls of these buildings still standing after World War I, and parts of the granary may be traced to this day.

Survivors from the wrecked *Grosvenor* passed through Mossel Bay late in the eighteenth century, bringing the first news of the disaster. Four sailors reported that “the Caffres had come down upon the people, carried off the female passengers and killed several of the men who attempted to protect them”. Heligert Muller, a district farmer, fed and clothed survivors and became prominent as leader of *Grosvenor* search parties. He found “women’s torn clothing” but the women had perished. During his third journey Muller reached the scene of the wreck and found cannon, ballast, English porcelain and other relics. He brought back two pieces of East Indian redwood which were identified as dunnage used to prevent chafing in the cargo holds of the *Grosvenor*.

Dr. Heinrich Lichtenstein, the German explorer, gave a lively description of a Mossel Bay farm when he visited the bay with Commissioner de Mist very early last century. Klaas Meyer was their host. “We were regaled with an excellent breakfast of cold provisions, admirable fruit and wines which might justly be called costly,” Lichtenstein wrote. “Even though I should excite a smile in my readers I must once more observe how much we were struck with the attractions among the female part of this family. We all agreed that we scarcely ever recollected to have seen more personal beauty than in the eldest daughter, a young woman about eighteen. Her whole manner and air had in it much more appearance of refinement than is usually to be found among the African damsels

and we really separated ourselves with reluctance from so lovely a creature". Lichtenstein found an Englishman named Murray owning a shop with a stock of cloth, hats, silks, glass and ironware. Murray had raised his prices "owing to the war". He had a small brig and another vessel trading between Mossel Bay and Cape Town but he lost both ships on the Agulhas reef soon afterwards.

Lichtenstein also called on the post-holder, the government official at Mossel Bay, a Dane named Abue. "He is a sensible, active man but lives here secluded from the world and unwedded," said Lichtenstein. "The fall of his patron made him take refuge in this remote corner of the globe." Lichtenstein explored the cave at Cape St. Blaize and decided

that the shells had been taken there and eaten by Hottentots, not carried there by birds as a previous traveller had suggested. He found the oysters were of fine flavour but some were so large that they could not be swallowed at a gulp. Lichtenstein dined with the widow Terreblanche of French descent and described his experience with obvious appreciation. "The number of dishes set before us was greater than is almost ever to be seen at the tables even of the most distinguished *bon-vivants* at Cape Town. We found that our hostess was celebrated in the country for her excellent table and that she prided herself particularly upon it. She gave us almost everything that the chase or the fisheries could furnish, with several sorts of vegetables dressed in an immense variety

of ways; nor would she suffer such a thing to be mentioned as paying her. As a great rarity we had in the dessert a cream cheese made upon the spot. Attempts to make good cheese near Cape Town had failed as the milk was not sufficiently rich due to poor feed.”

Next on the scene was the great William John Burchell, botanist and owner of the most luxurious wagon ever seen in Mossel Bay. The forward part was his bedroom and a canvas partition separated him from the stores; goods as presents to chiefs, clothing and blankets for his own Hottentots; books and other articles packed into five large chests. Burchell gave dinner parties in the wagon. One of his menus consisted of boiled beef, rice, melted sheep tail fat and salt, tea without sugar. I think of him playing

the flute and dancing on the beach at Mossel Bay.

The Rev. Christian Latrobe, a Moravian missionary born in England, arrived soon after Burchell. He stayed with the Meyers at Hartenbosch and recorded: “We found friendly faces and excellent quarters for the night. Mr. Meyer and his whole family gave us the kindest reception and seemed much pleased with our visit. The furniture in Mr. Meyer’s house, made of stinkwood, yellowwood and other curious woods, does him great credit, both as to beauty and strength. When we awoke in the morning the sky was covered with black clouds and it lightened and thundered much. At eight it cleared up though the thunder continued to roar all round the horizon. Our friendly host at breakfast gave us an account of the many wild

beasts that haunt the woods and bushy coasts of the bay, where they have good cover. Tygers and wolves now and then commit depredations; wild buffaloes are sometimes seen; but wild dogs are numerous and most to be dreaded. A wolf hunts only at night, is cowardly and may be guarded against by various means; but the wild dogs go in troops and hunt night and day. They attack every living animal and the 'dread of man' is but slight upon them. Mr. Meyer related that if they have killed a tame animal they will quit it on being attacked by man, but not if their prey is wild game. Not long ago a troop of them hunted a rhebuck into his neighbour's yard. The farmer sallied forth with his gun to drive off the pursuers and secure the fugitive for his own table, but was instantly attacked by the dogs and his life with

difficulty saved by his people. Porcupines are numerous; snakes creep into the poultry yards and houses and do much mischief. Our host getting up in the dark and walking into the hall felt something like a rope about his legs. On calling for a light he discovered it to be a yellow serpent. Had he accidentally trod upon it he would have been bitten by the venomous reptile. About nine o'clock we took leave of the family. Nowhere have we yet met with a more cordial reception than at Hartenbosch."

Admiral Sir Jahleel Brenton followed Latrobe; and he too, was entertained by the Meyers. "The house stood upon a gentle eminence sloping down from the mountain towards the sea and commanded a splendid view of the valley, the river and the sea

with the whole range of coast from Mossel Bay to the Kayman,” wrote Brenton. “Mr. Meyer is an example of what may be done by industry and exertion. His family and his house were highly creditable. Hospitality, neatness and every appearance of domestic felicity gave a relish to this scene which is not easily forgotten and would have been a subject for admiration in any part of the world. All that struck the eyes conveyed an idea of comfort and respectability and showed the effect of habitual attention to arrangement and cleanliness. A group of beautiful and orderly children gave promise that this valley could flourish in future generations.”

Brenton, a clever artist, painted the gabled Meyer farm under the mountains, with aloes in the foreground.

He noticed the wagons loaded with yellowwood beams for buildings, logs for planks, fellies for wheels, tree-nails for repairs to ships. Families, he said, lived mainly on mutton, game, tea and brandy. “A kind of Providence has showered down all the essentials of life on this favoured country,” Brenton declared. “Want of food is unknown either for man or beast. Houses built of clay and thatched with reeds - are readily constructed; the woodwork for doors, windows and rafters are easily obtained from the nearest *bosch*. Furniture is confined to the frames of a bedstead or two and thongs of rawhide. A large chest serves as a store closet and table. Clothing is easily made from sheepskin tanned or untanned. A few loads of wood carried to the Cape Town market will procure

them brandy and tea, the principal luxuries, also printed calicos and linen. A covered wagon is their dwelling-house.”

James Holman, the blind British naval lieutenant who travelled widely in spite of his handicap, visited Mossel Bay in the eighteen-twenties and encountered an English sailor there. He was an “easy and improvident beachcomber,” catching whales and gathering oysters; weatherwise, accurate as a barometer. Known as Mossel Bay Jack, the beachcomber also collected shells for the lime-burners, exchanging a wagonload for a cow, ox or wheat.

The Rev. James Backhouse, the Wesleyan missionary, found only ten houses in Mossel Bay in 1838, but wagons with fifty people had assembled there to wait for a ship. During

that year the government gave the place the official name of Aliwal West, but the residents disliked it and went on calling it Mossel Bay. The first Dutch Reformed Church was built there seven years later with the Rev. T. T. van der Riet as minister. A turf club was formed in 1852. In that year Mossel Bay became a municipality named Aliwal South; but the obstinate inhabitants refused to adopt the name and in the end they had their way.

When a “Cape Argus” reporter visited Mossel Bay in the middle of last century he said the place reminded him of Simonstown. There were one hundred and twenty houses, many of them solidly built. The new gaol, however, was described as “a mean little hovel, so tumble-down that the authorities fear to incarcerate prisoners within its walls.” A jetty ran out from

the beach and there was a landing place with steps. Admiral Pringle had sent an officer named Rice in H.M.S. *Hope* to chart Mossel Bay before the end of the eighteenth century. Now a harbourmaster named H. W. Laws was appointed. I have seen a report on the harbour by Laws in which he declared that Mossel Bay was perfectly secure from May to August and offered the only safe anchorage along that iron-bound coast. The bay was the deepest indentation between Simon's Bay and Delagoa Bay, as Knysna and Port Natal gave no shelter outside their narrow entrances. Laws pointed out that the opening of Meiring's Poort through the Swartberg had given Mossel Bay access to the interior and had helped the village to develop. Many houses had slate and zinc roofs and some had two storeys. The chapel

and the Dutch church gave the place "respectability and character". There were three hotels, an apothecary, provision shops and a public reading-room. Officials included a resident magistrate, district surgeon, customs officer and police for the population of six hundred. A post-cart ran to Cape Town three times a week. Between the years 1851 and 1858 more than four hundred ships had anchored in the bay.

Seal Island, which so many mailboat passengers have seen on harbour excursions by tug, was a scene of tragedy in the middle of last century. A shipmaster, a doctor named Syme and two others were drowned while visiting the island. Some years later a whale boat was stove in while the crew were attempting to land on Seal Island. On that occasion another

medical man was drowned, a Dr. Weinstein and three others.

Governor Sir Philip Wodehouse opened the Cape St. Blaize lighthouse and laid the cornerstone of a new jetty in the eighteen-sixties and a “grand tiffin” was held in his honour. At this period the newspapers reported that Mossel Bay had become a fashionable watering place. The hotels were the Marine, Masonic, Royal and Victoria; all of them offered “draught beer and oyster suppers”. By the year 1875 Mossel Bay had a town population of twelve hundred with nearly four thousand in the district.

Twelve years later the town was shocked by the first murder among the white community. Louisa Ann Delbridge, a schoolgirl, was found throttled. Tracks showed that the murderer had worn odd boots. A man

named William Matfield was tried and condemned to death. He wrote a confession shortly before the execution and this was published in the newspapers: “I committed the crime while in a mad state and it was like a dream when I came to my senses. Since my sentence I have turned over to the Catholic Church. I wish to thank the magistrate, police and gaoler for their kindness. I leave a wife and four children and trust the people of Mossel Bay will be charitable towards them.” Matfield was pinioned in his cell at a quarter to eight one morning in June 1888 and accompanied to the scaffold by Father Ballesty and two constables. A service was read and Matfield responded. Crowds had gathered on the hill overlooking the gaol and as the scaffold had been put up in the gaol yard the onlookers were able to watch

the execution. Before the noose was adjusted Matfield addressed those present. (According to the local newspaper the witnesses included the deputy sheriff, district surgeon, police “and a few other gentlemen”). Matfield said: “I am about to suffer the just penalty for the crime I have committed and I commend my spirit to God.” The trap was sprung and soon afterwards the watchers on the hillside dispersed.

Towards the end of the century the first intermediate steamer called at Mossel Bay to load eighty thousand oranges and ostrich feathers worth ten thousand pounds. She was the brand new *Arundel Castle* of four thousand tons, the second ship in the Castle fleet to bear that name. Another interesting arrival at the port, in the winter of 1903, was the first motor-car, a six-

horse Gladiator driven by a Mr. Menzies. “The car attracted a deal of attention as it careered merrily along,” reported the local newspaper. “Mr. Menzies is conveying a government official to Port Elizabeth and thence northwards. He covered the distance between Cape Town and Mossel Bay in twenty-four hours net, not including stoppages for sleep and meals. The car negotiates hills with a facility that fully sustains the claims made for these vehicles in regard to their capacity for speed and power.”

Trawling started in Mossel Bay waters very early this century. The research vessel *Pieter Faure* fished off Cape Infanta and brought up hauls too large to lift inboard. Soles, which had been regarded as a great luxury in Mossel Bay, were sold at a penny each; for those were the days before cold

storage and rail facilities. When the first train reached Mossel Bay in 1905 there were no more penny soles.

Mossel Bay still has a number of reminders of its past besides the Ou Posboom, the cannon and anchors. Marsh Street, the main thoroughfare, recalls Mr. George Marsh, the first magistrate. Some of the old warehouses of honeycoloured local stone have arched doorways built in the days when high-piled wagons entered the yards of the merchants. Die Bakke, one of the three main beaches, gained its name at the time when farmers camped there and then animals drank at the iron water troughs (*die bakke*) on the sands.

Mossel Bay has a country museum where many fine specimens of old Afrikaans culture are preserved. It is

housed in a low white building on the Hartenbos farm, ancestral home of the Meyer family. Strandloper implements form a contrast with the wagon equipment of the Voortrekker period and farmhouse furniture. Here are white linen *kappies* and a baby's cape decorated with spotted guinea fowl feathers. Old musical instruments and sewing-machines, a wooden kitchen mincer, guns and medical kit, pewter and chinaware are among the Hartenbos exhibits.

I mentioned aloe fumes when I first entered Mossel Bay. This is one of Africa's ancient trades for the Egyptians were using aloes as medicine three thousand years before Christ; and at the Cape the Hottentots were collecting the juice for the same purpose long before the first explorers arrived. Adrian van der

Stel sent the *Aloe ferox* seed to Holland. Dried aloe juice weighing millions of pounds has passed through Mossel Bay since the middle of last century. German schooners called for it and the dried sap was exported in special boxes made of Outeniqua yellowwood. You may smell herbs and sweet flowers and fragrant heath in the Mossel Bay district; but when the aloes are boiled in cauldrons the odour dominates the countryside.

You see the tall spikes of the red-hot poker along the roads and over large areas of veld in the early spring. The aloes look after themselves. Tappers work at all seasons though dry weather is best. Then you see the coloured tappers hacking off the leaves and piling them in the traditional way, cut ends inwards, on to a goatskin spread

over a hollow in the ground. After about twelve hours the juice is poured into petrol cans. It looks rather like dark brown treacle when it is boiled. Finally it dries and hardens into brittle cakes.

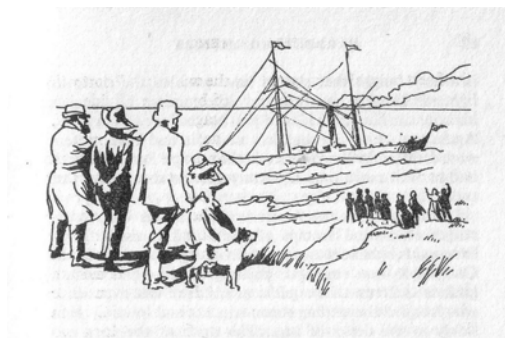
Aloe tappers have to guard against the effects of the powerful medicine they handle all day long. They find it necessary to add dried beans and mealies to their bread and potatoes. Even their sweat turns yellow after a spell among the aloes. Aloe juice contains the purgative drug aloin; the characteristic bitter taste is disguised by coating laxative pills with sugar or saccharine. Fresh juice from the leaf is used as an eye application for ophthalmia. The juice is also used for treating scab in sheep. Sweet nectar from the flower is a narcotic, causing symptoms like curare poisoning. Buck

are aware of the medical properties and have been seen nibbling the leaves. Some farmers think that dosing sheep and cattle with aloes will affect the blood and force ticks to abandon their hosts, but this is a fallacy. Dried aloe leaves give a smokeless flame and provide the finest of all fuel for flat-irons. Aloe ash mixed with powdered tobacco gives just the right flavour (say the addicts) to certain forms of snuff. Aloes were once used for embalming. Country folk painted the woodwork in their homes with aloe juice to keep beetles away and impart a deep colour. Indeed the aloe has been valued since the days of Solomon, as you will remember: "All their garments smell of myrrh and aloes and cassia." According to Mossel Bay legend, the secret of the aloe medicine and the method of

preparation were revealed by a dying Hottentot slave to his master.

Mossel Bay has one other unusual industry, a factory for milling the yellow ochre mined in the Albertinia district and worked into a fine powder for paint. The resort claims the finest natural bathing pool in the world, the Poort with its rock walls and sandy floor, filled by each high tide. The old fishing village of thatched cottages has grown into a town that has covered the hillside; a town of modern shops and villas and one circular home on a pedestal admired by architects. Oysters cost a bit more than they did in the days when the first hotels served oyster suppers. If Vasco da Gama returned today he would find no one simple enough to supply him with a bull in exchange for a red cap. The tigers and wolves

(in reality leopards and jackals) of Latrobe's time are no longer a serious menace. Little schooners are in no danger of being driven on to Santos beach. Bushman paintings in the caves of Cape St. Blaize were blacked out by the fires of campers long ago. The oysters are still there, thank heaven, and so is the view of the distant Outeniquas, the range that inspired Francois le Vaillant nearly two centuries ago when he declared: "I was rapt in wonder. This land bears the name of Outeniqualand, which in the Hottentot tongue means 'a man laden with honey'. The flowers grow there in millions. Nature has made an enchanted abode of this beautiful place."



CHAPTER SEVEN BAY OF LOST CARGOES

OLD sailormen have told me that Port Elizabeth once had a seafaring quarter as rowdy and dangerous as old Cape Town's waterfront streets. The surf-boat crews of Algoa Bay, they declared, were every bit as bold and skilful as the Table Bay watermen. Just as Table Bay skippers feared the winter north-westers so the ship-

masters of last century dreaded the black south-easters at Algoa Bay.

Algoa Bay must be paved with lost cargoes, everything from steel rails and other "Glasgow jewellery" to slabs of marble and galvanised sheets. Hundreds of anchors have rested in the mud for centuries. Thousands of fathoms of valuable anchor chains have been abandoned there, enough to hold the fleets of the world. When bales and cases dropped from the slings the Customs men known as "tide waiters" recovered some of the flotsam on North End beach; but Algoa Bay has swallowed greedily fortunes in heavy freight that should have gone to the shore in lighters. Those who know only the modern all-weather harbour can have little idea of past hardships and disasters. Again and again the builders of walls

and breakwaters were defeated by the violence of the sea and Port Elizabeth had to wait more than a century for the secure basin of today.

I can remember the wind-swept anchorage where passenger ships and tramps plunged and bucketed with strings of lighters bumping heavily against their sides. Gangways were smashed, passengers had to enter tall baskets and trust the magnificent blacks of vast experience who handled the rattling steam-winches and lowered them safely to the decks of tugs. The trade of the port was carried on over the years in spite of wild and frightening storms and all too many shipwrecks. In the days of sail a strong south-easter must have been a nightmare for those afloat. Shipmasters took compass bearings of Fort Frederick and Bird Rock and

anchored in six fathoms, grey sand over clay. October to April were the months they feared. When haze appeared on the horizon; when the air became cold and damp; when the port office hoisted a warning, then careful masters made for open sea. Some trusted their ground tackle but if their cables parted the surf claimed them and they pounded on the sand. Others hesitated, tried to claw off the lee shore; their topsails carried away, mainsails split and they became victims of the heavy, breaking seas. Often by the next morning a fine ship would have become a mass of tangled rope and shattered timber.

As long as the wind blew from the west Algoa Bay offered safe anchorage. When it veered to the east of Cape Recife a swell rose and the lighters became hard to manage.

Black south-easters filled the sky with dark clouds and masters realised the danger before the gale warning was signalled from the shore. Tarpaulins were dragged over the holds of the lighters and all cargo work came to a halt. Small craft made for the shore. Ship after ship veered out more cable; sixty fathoms became seventy, eighty, a hundred, a hundred and twenty, and men wondered whether the great chains would stand the test. Steamers with their fires burning were safe enough for they could use their engines to relieve the strain or move out to sea if necessary. Sailing ships had to rely on anchors and chain and springs. Their crews stared across the anchorage to see how others were faring and caught occasional glimpses through blinding spray. Landmarks

became invisible. They heard the roaring of the gale, the surf on the beach, the nerve-racking creak and groaning of the windlass. All night there would be the lightning and the rain; the wind blowing at seventy, eighty miles an hour; men working frantically by the light of storm lanterns; rockets going up, tar barrels ablaze as signals of distress. Dawn would show the black cloud masses still racing overhead. Dawn on the beach would bring sorrow to all who set eyes on the doomed and the dead. Sometimes the crowds on the beach were able to count the men in the bows of a wrecked ship, but they had to watch them drowning, one by one.

Years ago during an early visit to Port Elizabeth I was advised to call on two old citizens named Josephus Winter and Thomas Morgan. After

this lapse of time I can hardly believe my own notes, for these men talked freely of the eighteen-fifties. They remembered Port Elizabeth as a place of sandy roads like an up-country village; a Main Street crowded with wool wagons; post-cart drivers with bugles; masses of foam blowing across Jetty Street and across Market Square during a south-easter. They had seen a sailing ship break away from her anchor and drive right through a wooden jetty, leaving a wide gap. Then she met her end on the rocks. They talked of the wreck of the *Charlotte*, a troopship bound from Cork to Calcutta under sail. She was no *Birkenhead*, for everyone on board seemed to have been panic-stricken. The *Charlotte* carried one hundred and sixty-three officers and men of the Twenty-

seventh Regiment, eleven women and twenty-six children and a full crew. She put into Aloga Bay for provisions and water and while at anchor there a south-east gale blew up. Almost everyone in the town went down to the foot of Jetty Street to watch the drama. "Above the fury of the wind and sea we could hear the cries of the women and children," recalled Mr. Winter. "They saw the danger even before the ship parted with her anchor." The captain of the *Charlotte* got a little sail on her and tried to beat out of the bay, but it was hopeless. The troopship crawled along just outside the breakers, parallel with the shore. Off North End beach the mate jumped overboard and was drowned in the surf. Survivors declared that the mate had tried to persuade the captain to beach the ship

on the sand. When the captain refused the mate said he was going to give himself a sporting chance of reaching the shore, and went to his death. The *Charlotte* struck the rockiest part of the foreshore and broke in half. The harbourmaster sent a rocket line across but no one in the *Charlotte* touched it. Then he sent out a lifeboat at great risk. "A panic at this time seized the crew and troops," reported the harbourmaster. "In defiance of repeated hails from the shore they jumped overboard. I launched the boat in a fearful surf and several times pulled alongside. The boat filled and was driven on the rocks after several men had been washed overboard." Mr. Winter said the *Charlotte* broke up rapidly but the stern came so close to the shore that a number of people were saved. At daybreak hardly a fragment

of the troopship was to be seen at the place where she had struck. Sixty soldiers, eleven women and all the children were drowned, and the total death roll was one hundred and fifteen. Port Elizabeth regarded the *Charlotte* disaster as a mystery. As a rule people facing death are stirred to action but nearly all on board the *Charlotte* seemed to have been paralysed by fear. By the way, this wreck which was described to me by eye-witnesses occurred as far back as 1854. Captain Salmond, who tried to organise the rescue, was awarded a gold medal, and this has been preserved in the Port Elizabeth library.

South-east gales brought work for the local shipyards. They caulked the damaged ships, fitted new rudders, fashioned new mainmasts and topmasts and rigged ships of all sizes.

When the *Star of Empire* was dismantled and abandoned the Port Elizabeth craftsmen fitted her out again and sent her to sea as the *Lady Grey*. Famous little Cape Town traders were calling at Algoa Bay a century ago: the *Lord of the Isles*, which went on to Mauritius for sugar, the guano island vessel *Alert*, Captain James Glendinning's *Admiral*, the *Anna*, *Albatross* and *Tonquille*. Port Elizabeth builders launched a schooner of their own in the middle of last century, the *Penguin* for communication with Bird Island. They had their own whaling industry, too, started by Frederick Korsten, the Dutch aristocrat and merchant who was there before the settlers arrived. He was also a farmer and shipowner. Korsten's ship *Helena* sailed to England and he

opened up the sealing and guano trade with the Algoa Bay islands.

Whaling flourished all through last century, the fierce old-fashioned whaling which made bull-fighting seem a sport for timid people. Algoa Bay had several great harpooners. Rival whalers kept a sharp lookout from the Donkin Reserve or St. Croix island; and a smoke fire was the signal that a whale had been sighted. Right whales swam into Algoa Bay to calve from June to September each year. When the lookoutmen saw a "blow" the crews rushed down to North End Beach and launched the narrow, double-ended boats. Portuguese harpooners were among the pioneers. One daredevil named Fernandez often jumped from the boat on to a whale's back to drive the lance home. Searle, another skipper, used a small harpoon

gun fired from the shoulder; it had a kick that usually knocked him over but when the dart exploded in the right spot the whale died quickly. Among the last of the North End whalersmen was Old Darby, a fearless Malay. He once brought in a huge sperm whale, sixty feet long and valued at eight hundred pounds. They had their blubber pots on North End beach, and all the poor (and the dogs) of Port Elizabeth gathered there to feast on discarded fragments of fat whale meat. Whalebone was cleaned and sold in those days of corsets and unwanted parts were dumped at sea. But the great skeletons remained for many years as relics of the hunting. Mr. Herbert McWilliams, the well-known architect and yacht designer, uses the old cauldrons as flowerpots at his home on the Swartkops River. The

vertebrae of whales decorate his garden. Among his nautical museum pieces are the figurehead of H.M.S. *Medusa*, one of Nelson's flagships; ships' lanterns, a signal cannon, bells and bollards and anchors.

Port Elizabeth had its pubs in the very early days, the Red Lion Tavern and the Robinson Hotel. In the eighteenforties came the Phoenix Hotel, named after the pioneer paddle steamer *Phoenix* that traded along the coast. Cobb's coaches, drawn by eight horses, started from the Phoenix. By the middle of last century there were rather more bars and canteens than the little town needed. Strand Street, which had a vile reputation, was the resort of smugglers, drunken seamen, escaped convicts and army deserters. Here the thirsty sailorman could refresh

himself at the Standard, the Prince of Wales, Kromm's, Ted Sasse's, the Caledonian, the Admiral Rodney and other hotels and canteens. In this unlighted quarter, known as Irish Town, beachcombers slept in surf boats and defended themselves against a horde of rats. Here the stevedores fortified themselves with brandy before pulling off to ships in the bay. Often they needed strong drink for their boats capsized again and again in heavy weather. People loved to watch the surf boats coming in and waiting just outside the line of breakers for a word from the coxs'n. At the right moment the coxs'n would dip his long steering oar and shout; the men would pull together and come roaring in on the crest of a wave. Once the boat touched all hands would jump into the water.

With shoremen helping they would lift the heavy boat with slings and spars and rush her out of reach of the sea. Passengers were carried on shore by natives.

Irish Town was tough but an Irish priest named Father Murphy restored law and order. He rode a black horse and carried only a cane. When the black horse died he acquired a white horse; and an admirer called his hotel the White Horse in honour of the priest's steed. Thanks to Father Murphy's influence the Roman Catholic prisoners in the little wooden gaol were allowed out on Sundays to attend Mass. For three decades Father Murphy visited the Irish emigrants who settled in Port Elizabeth. He died nearly a century ago but the man and his famous horses have never been forgotten.

Port Elizabeth had a German colony in the eighteenthfifties and they gathered at Hirsch's Hotel, the Commercial in Queen Street. It was not only the fountain with goldfish and lilies that attracted them. Hirsch also provided sausages and pumpernickel, Bavarian cheese and pretzels. His cooks transmuted the plain local cabbage into a legendary *sauerkraut*, shredded and flavoured with caraway seeds, garnished with apples and onions and frankfurters. Hirsch imported the typical German herb liqueurs as well as the Rhine brandies and Steinhaeger gin; and he kept an unfailing stock of regional beers to suit the exacting palates of residents and sailors. There came a time when the German colony in Port Elizabeth formed a Deutsche Liedertafel, gathering under a huge imperial coat-of-arms with black,

white and red ribbons. They drank and sang and ate *rollmops*, and when the glasses were raised the toasts could be heard in the street - *Prost ! Zum Wohle ! Zur Gesundheit !* Strange to say, a favourite meeting place of the German colony late last century was the Britannia Hotel.

Other early hotels in Queen Street were the George and Dragon, the Oddfellows Arms, the Rose and Shamrock, Fountain and Albion. The Vine in Sea Lane was known for some reason as "His Lordship's Larder". Queen Street also had, as a contrast, a garden filled with one of the finest collections of ships' figureheads ever seen in South Africa. Mr. Tee, the owner, did not exactly welcome shipwrecks; but he was always on the spot when wrecks were put up for sale, and the auctioneer could always rely

on a bid for the figurehead. In this way Mr. Tee became the owner of a nautical museum far more romantic than the rusty anchors, chain and other marine equipment that surrounded the George Hotel in Main Street. Where are they now, those crude yet robust wooden statues of classical figures and naval heroes, those famous men and women staring with sightless eyes towards the oceans they had lost? These images of good luck were not always works of art. Some came from the benches of ships' carpenters, though now and again a shipowner commissioned a brilliant woodcarver and adorned a prow with a delicate figurehead that brought the whole ship to life. Mr. Tee had a stupid-looking man with a walrus moustache between two lovely female effigies in flowing robes.

There was an eagle from a Yankee whaler and a lion from some unknown wreck. Carved from pine and brightly painted, these were relics of the golden age of sail.

Dick Smithers, an American who made a living by breaking up wrecks, was among the Port Elizabeth characters towards the end of last century. He ran a boarding-house as a sideline, and his dances with a pianist and three fiddlers were described as the best entertainment value of the period. Smithers charged an entrance fee of one shilling. Of course there were scenes of wild disorder when seamen of the different nations clashed, when fists and belts came into action. But on happier occasions the sentimental mariners gathered round the

orchestra and sang with tears in their bloodshot eyes:

*But a maiden so sweet lives in that
little street,
She's the daughter of Widow
McNally:
She has bright golden hair, and the
boys all declare
She's the sunshine of Paradise
Alley.*

Among the picturesque corners of Port Elizabeth early this century was the Chinese market garden. Chinese growers took their vegetables from door to door in pannier baskets. Even in those days some people enjoyed the authentic Chinese dishes; meat and fish cooked with sesame or peanut oil and mild spices; mushrooms and bamboo shoots, shrimps and almonds and soya sauce; cakes flavoured with powdered ginger.

Malay fishermen carried their fish on long bamboo poles. Their mosques were at the lower end of Strand Street. The fishermen moved to South End later and lived in wattle and daub huts. Like the Cape Malays this colony at Algoa Bay loved picnics on holidays; and they streamed out to the Swartkops River in their carts. The fezzed men favoured brown suits with gold watch chains; women appeared in dazzling clothes. They danced their own *volkspele* and they sang:

*So lank as die rietjie in die water
lê
In die water lê, in die water lê
So lank as die rietjie in die water
lê
Blommetjie gedink om my.*

Mr. McWilliams, the architect I have mentioned, has pointed out that the city has a number of very narrow

buildings. He traced this peculiarity back to the days when wooden spars from wrecks were used as main beams in new buildings. A spar twenty-seven feet long would span a roof or floor; and so many a frontage was determined. Port Elizabeth owes its deep, narrow buildings to the gales in Algoa Bay.

Port Elizabeth once watched the daily movements of the most remarkable train in the country. It was not a train to boast about for it carried the refuse of the town, a train of trucks loaded with eighty tons of household rubbish. People called it the “Driftsands Special”. It ran for the first time towards the end of last century and completed its unromantic task during the first two decades of this century.

Drifting sand menaced Port Elizabeth in the eightenseventies. First it was

deposited on the beach and blown inland; then it seeped back into the bay at the wrong spot and threatened the harbour. The dune area, with sandhills thirty feet high, was known as the “Downs” and became a landmark for ships in Algoa Bay. Reclamation started almost a century ago, convicts planted Port Jackson willows, but the sand still appeared to be gaining. People spoke nervously of Port Elizabeth being engulfed by sand. So a railway line was built into the heart of the sandy desert and the “Driftsands Special” whistled off for the first time. Convicts spread the refuse over the dunes. Self-sown tomatoes, pumpkins and acacias grew out of the sand. Stable sweepings yielded unexpected crops of oathay. But still a yellow cloud of sand arose in a strong breeze and fell on the decks of ships miles

away at sea. Only after years of constant work was the desert transformed into the pleasant Humewood resort of today. And only a few railway lovers mourned the passing of the “Driftsands Special.” Mr. E. P. Dimbleby, the Port Elizabeth editor, once told me that the sight he always gazed upon in wonder mixed with horror was the fantastic horde of flies which hovered over the train and accompanied it to its destination. One fly does not make very much noise, but those millions of flies buzzing in unison almost rivalled the engine-driver’s whistle.

A more fragrant train is the “Apple Express” which brings the apple harvest into Port Elizabeth from stations as far away as Avontuur. Early this century it set out as the “Walmer Coffee Pot”; but those

locomotives have gone. It might also be known as the “Orange and Pear Train” for the Langkloof orchards fill the trucks with these fruits. And there are times when the aroma of tobacco is wafted through the countryside from the “Apple Express”. It is a narrow-gauge railway, two feet six inches wide, built at one third the cost of South African standard gauge. Railway-lovers flock to a miniature railway but during the fruit season they have to make way for more profitable cargoes bound for the harbour.

CHAPTER EIGHT

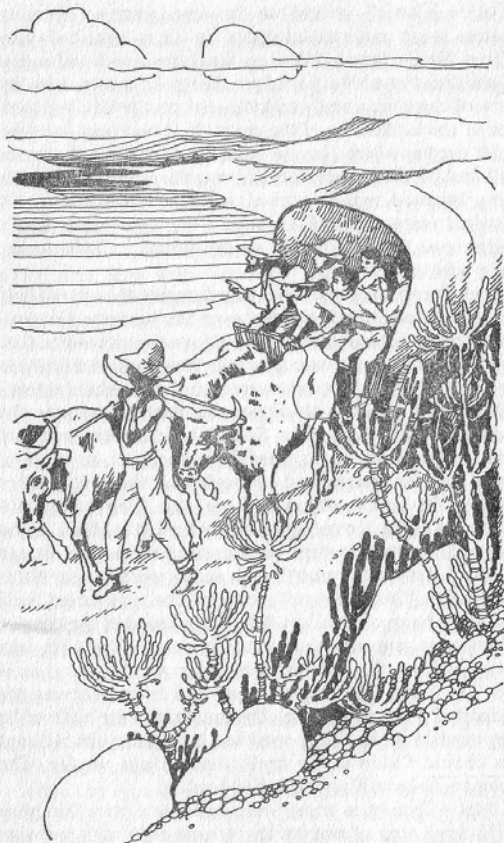
BY WAGON TO THE KOWIE

MY first journey to Port Alfred was by ox-wagon. The trek was memorable because this was my only experience of South Africa's traditional "ship of the veld". I was ten years old, an unhappy boarder at a Grahamstown school, and when the short holidays came it was almost impossible to go to Cape Town and back in the time allowed. So I went with other exiles to the school camp at Port Alfred.

It was considered a great privilege to be chosen as one of the wagon party. The wagons, bearing tents, set out several days before the end of the term, so that those arriving by train would find everything ready for them. The year was 1910, with Halley's Comet sweeping across the night sky.

I saw ostriches and oranges along the road between Grahamstown and the coast, but not a single motor-car. This was still the heyday of the ox-wagon and the rough tracks resounded with the wild cries of the drivers and the sounds of their long whips. I discovered that oxen had names too weird to remember; but I recall their strength and patience and fearsome horns. Sometimes the wheels sank into holes and I walked ahead while the blacks struggled with the teams. I found the whole journey very much to my taste; the swinging trot of the oxen over hard ground; the long outspan at midday; the smell of the earth. A box with a heavy lid held the food and it gave out a fine aroma of coffee and brown sugar, rusks and pepper. In the evening there would be stewed mutton

HARBOURS OF MEMORY



"My first journey to Port Alfred was by ox-wagon. The trek was memorable because this was my only experience of South Africa's traditional 'ship of the veld'."

and *askoek*. I would have gone on for ever provided the wagon was taking me away from that hated school. However, the trek ended all too soon at an old-fashioned Port Alfred which had none of the smart, modern shop-windows or tiled villas.

Close to the camp was a store that could not have changed much since the days of the Settlers. It was a low building like a stable with a stoep displaying felt hats and *velskoene*, pitchforks and saddles. Packing cases formed the counter and the dark room smelt of moth powders used to protect the woollen goods; moth powders, great bars of soap and roll tobacco. I was interested only in the jars of sweets though I admired the gaudy handkerchiefs and guns.

We always called Port Alfred “the Kowie”, a native name based on the

rushing of the waters. During a river excursion by steam-launch we kept a look-out for buffalo; but there were not many left even in those days for the rinderpest had almost exterminated them. I saw a lifeboat crossing the sinister bar that had caused so many wrecks and drownings. The port was a ghost harbour, a deserted port where the stone embankments, wharves and mooring rings were reminders of the long period when Port Alfred sheltered steamers and square-riggers. Then I went back to school by train, over the graceful Blaauwkrantz bridge of tragic memories. More than half a century passed before I saw Port Alfred again.

According to legend the Portuguese were the first white men to enter the Kowie River. They must have

sighted the mouth; but I doubt very much whether such fine, cautious navigators would have risked their boats and their lives so far from home by crossing the unknown bar and sailing up the uncharted stream.

Old charts show a Rio Infante and a Penedo das Fontes, which have been identified by some writers with the Kowie River and the Fountain Rocks close by. Dr. Eric Axelson, the most reliable modern authority, has declared that the problem is insoluble from the present known sources of information. Years ago the imaginative Professor E. H. L. Schwarz (of "Kalahari redemption" fame) declared that Bartholomew Diaz took three of his boats up the Kowie to a spot which he named St. Mary's Cove. There he found a spring and secured fresh water for his ships. Schwarz

went on: "Diaz left a box of documents relating to his voyage together with an emblem of Christianity to mark, as it were, the farthest limits of the faith in this unknown country." Early this century an ironbound box filled with the remains of sodden documents was dug up at the Cove and there were fragments of a devotional image. These relics were thrown away by people who were ignorant of the possible historical value. Schwarz may have been right.

Another legend which has been told in some detail but still lacks an authentic source, placed a Portuguese castle at the Kowie River mouth. It was said to have been built by Don Pedro Basto, a seventeenth century pirate, who called his stronghold "Eagle's Nest." From there he attacked passing ships laden with rich Eastern cargoes. Don Pedro

was supposed to have been deserted by his followers and he was wandering alone in the bush one day when the blacks murdered him. The harbour master's house was placed early last century on a ruin and the builders were said to have found dungeons with rusty iron rings in the walls. Some years later a number of skeletons of Europeans were dug up in the neighbourhood. I doubt whether there is much truth in the "Eagle's Nest" legend but a chance discovery in the Lisbon archives may clear up these old Kowie mysteries one day.

John Campbell the missionary crossed the Kowie River near the mouth last century some years before the first settlers arrived. A Hottentot soldier led the way on horseback, following elephant paths through otherwise impenetrable forests. At low tide the

drift was a quarter of a mile wide and the water came over the backs of the oxen. Campbell found British soldiers from one of the forts on the beach fishing. The entrails of gutted fish had drawn sharks to the spot and Campbell said that a ravenous man-eater attacked a child wearing a red dress. The child escaped. Campbell referred to the river as the Buffalo. Another distinguished visitor at that period was Burchell the botanist.

When the 1820 Settlers first set eyes on the Kowie mouth it was a marsh. Great white herons were feeding there, no doubt, while kingfishers hovered over the lagoon and cormorants dived for fish. It was a barren spot with the south-easter howling down the beach; but the newcomers must have found some comfort when they took oysters off the rocks,

speared soles and netted *galjoen* and *kabeljou*. Very soon the Kowie (also known as Port Frances) was regarded as a coming place. Sloops and other small craft sailed into the river and false hopes were raised; hopes that cost the Cape Government and others half a million pounds sterling, spread over about half a century. When the schooner *Elizabeth* crossed and re-crossed the bar safely the "Cape Town Gazette" declared: "The settlers after two seasons of unprecedented calamity and distress have now the prospect of all the advantages of water communication into the heart of the country. Vessels may discharge cargoes on the river banks from their decks."

Port Frances unfortunately became a place of wrecks and drownings. Boats were upset on the bar, fishing

boats went out and never returned. Larger craft were reported missing and like the *Waratah* they never made port. James Holman, that shrewd, insatiable traveller, blind though he was, visited the Kowie in the eighteen-twenties and predicted the failure of the place as a harbour. He had been a naval officer and he knew the dangers of a sand bar. Holman said there was a village of thirty houses, but "the people would leave if they could dispose of their property without loss." A rare and surprising discovery on the beach at this period was the last remnant of an Antarctic iceberg. Travellers commented on the shells to be found there, nearly two thousand species from the argonauts to chank shells.

Of course the man who really put the Kowie on the map for a time was that

fantastic character William Cock. He was the leader of a party of 1820 Settlers; a short, handsome young man of great ability and tremendous drive; a man who would never admit defeat. Cock lost his money not long after landing but soon made a fortune as a cattle speculator. Then he became a shipowner. During a visit to the Kowie he remarked to someone: "What a pity that such a fine estuary is not made available as a port." The idea grew in his mind until it became an obsession. Cock noticed that the river channel came in on a curve, and he believed that if it could be straightened the floods would scour out a deep channel so that large vessels would be able to enter safely. He cut a new exit for the river through the sandhills on the west bank, built a sea-wall to hold

back high tides, and changed the course of the river.

For days when the surface was breaking, sometimes for weeks on end, it took nerve and fine seamanship to cross that perilous bar. Some made it, many lost their ships and their lives. The anxious master had to count the seas, judge the right moment and make a dash for it. Steamers came through the broken water quicker than craft under sail; yet steamers were among the victims of the treacherous Kowie.

Miss Kate Pigot, daughter of Major Pigot, watched an early shipwreck and left a fine description of it. "Everyone in the village gathered at the mouth of the river, men, women and children old enough to be out, wringing their hands to see the ship leaning over and men clinging to the mast. They had but one boat and this capsized on

launching and was carried out to sea. The surf was too wild to send any boat from shore and signs were made to the men to swim for it. It was not far, but in that wind with the waves crashing no shout could carry far. We watched with beating hearts while three sailors plunged into the sea and fought their way through the surf. Two-score eager hands stretched to help them as they struggled through. A fire of driftwood was lit to warm them and the flames, blown ragged in the wind in the falling dusk, made the scene appear wilder yet.”

Donald Moodie the magistrate was the hero of this episode, for he swam out to the wreck six times and brought the remaining six men on shore. “Between each trip he was sustained with brandy neat, and but for that he cannot have survived it,” Kate Pigot wrote. “Such

a cheer went up as he and the last man came within reach. All recovered now thank God and no lives lost, though the schooner battered beyond hope of salvage. ‘Tis feared this will mean less confidence than ever in Port Frances.”

Optimists said that when the harbour scheme was carried out “ships would be as safe in the river as in the London docks.” Nevertheless, Cock lost one ship after another. He had the forty horse-power paddle-steamer *Sir John St. Aubyn* specially built for the Kowie trade; ninety feet long with two-berth cabins for sixteen passengers. An advertisement stated that there was a ladies’ cabin with private W.C. and a dining-saloon. Cock was on board when she made a record passage of three and a half

days from Cape Town. She was damaged on the bar and sank in the river. Cock also lost his schooner *Africaine*; and after several years of valuable service his iron schooner *British Settler* foundered near Saldanha. However, there was a period when Cock was sending profitable cargoes of “Kowie kippers” to Mauritius and meat to St. Helena.

Cock built his famous residence “Richmond House” in the eighteen-thirties. This spacious, battlemented home on the heights of the west bank still dominates the river. Inevitably it became known as “Cock’s Castle”, but never as “Cock’s Folly”; for it was a fort as well as a house and it saved Cock and his family when the native hordes attacked the settlement. One of Cock’s sons designed the

place and he sank deep foundations in the sandy ground of the bushclad promontory. The snow-white walls are three feet thick. The flat roof was reinforced to stand the weight of cannon. Water tanks were built underground so that the castle might stand a long siege.

When the Kowie settlement was attacked by the blacks in the middle of last century Cock’s schooner *Africaine* was lying in the river. Guns from the schooner were brought to the castle and a brass swivel gun and cannon were mounted on the roof and used to beat off the raiders. Berrington’s Inn went up in flames during the fight but “Cock’s Castle” proved to be impregnable. Famous visitors were entertained there in later years: Prince Alfred, Sir Benjamin D’Urban, Sir Harry Smith and many

of the frontier military leaders. The solid castle, with its view of the river mouth and the surf on the bar, remains one of the landmarks of the coast. Bird watchers love the quiet garden where Knysna louries and African hoopoes still feed on the berries. Yet this was the estate from which three hundred natives, armed with guns, carried off six hundred head of Cock's cattle. "We gave them battle within one hundred yards of my house," Cock wrote. "We were only twenty."

Port Frances became Port Alfred during the second half of last century. Cock handed over the harbour development to the Cape Government and for a time it seemed that the Kowie might become a serious rival to Port Elizabeth and East London. Convicts were sent there in the eighteenfifties and for nearly three

decades Port Alfred was the largest convict station in South Africa. Five hundred prisoners of many races, aged from seventeen to seventy, toiled in the quarry and strengthened the breakwaters against the hammer-blows of the sea. Men served life sentences at the Kowie, guarded by British soldiers. Some escaped, for sailing ships left the river bound for distant parts of the world; and though many were caught there were a few "broad arrow" stowaways who regained their freedom. Everyone in Port Alfred has heard of the convict ghost who appears only on Christmas Day. He was brought from Grahamstown by three warders; and as it was Christmas Day they dropped into an inn, leaving the manacled prisoner outside. The man hid in the bush while the warders drank. They searched and found him

without his chains. “Stop or we fire!” shouted one warder. The convict dashed off and was shot dead.

Port Alfred knew many vicissitudes as a port. The year 1873 was a year of wrecks: the *African Belle* with her wine and brandy; the *Catherine Marie* and the *Laetitia*. Marine insurance underwriters began demanding high rates for ships intending to enter the river. However, the harbour work went on and an historic locomotive known officially as “number nine” was landed there to carry stone from the quarry to the west pierhead. “Number nine” had hauled the first train out of Cape Town station; and this is the locomotive preserved as a national monument on the Cape Town station to this day.

Dredgers worked on the bar. One dredger, the *Perseverance*, deserved her name for she spent thirty years in the river. Yet ships were sometimes delayed for five weeks at a time while tugs were sent out with “depth-charges” of gunpowder to blast away the bar. They killed shoals of fish but failed to remove the sandbank.

Square-rigged mail steamers called regularly at Port Alfred in the eighteen seventies, anchoring offshore and loading from lighters. This was a prosperous decade; and in one boom year the Kowie exports exceeded £100,000. When the depth on the bar was twenty feet, vessels of seven hundred tons could use the port. Old photographs show ten ships in the river at the same time. Sailors deserted and headed for the diamond fields; but the Port Alfred taverns

were flourishing and ways were devised of finding crews for vessels outward bound. Cock, the indomitable Cock, turned to growing coffee and cotton. Tugs carried hundreds of trippers over the bar at half-a-crown a head to see the ships and the fishing boats at work. Hunters came out of the Kowie bush with leopards and buffalo. A daredevil named Thomas Houghton crossed the bar in a canoe and was drowned. And, of course, there was much talk of the coming of the railway.

Mr. John X. Merriman “turned the first sod” early in the eighteen-eighties. Rails, sleepers and trucks arrived by sea. George Pauling, that famous and resourceful contractor, inspected the route and his men carried out the work with a subsidy of £2,000 a mile. It was a costly

private venture; but the Port Alfred payroll was £500 a week and that kept Style’s Hotel and the bars full. Those early locomotives (and the tugs on the river) provided work for woodcutters; there was no coal available and the furnaces devoured wood fuel.

Floods ravaged the Kowie banks eighty years ago, swamping the convict station and mental hospital. The railway offered excursion fares “to see the Kowie wrecks”. Port Alfred was nearing the end of its time as a harbour. Coasters still entered the river occasionally; but when the *Lily of Cape Town* was lost on the bar in 1894 with a cargo of cement, shipowners decided not to visit Port Alfred any more. Once it seemed that the Kowie might have been chosen instead of the Buffalo,

but the tally of cargoes never kept pace with the hopes of William Cock and his followers, and wreck after wreck ruined Port Alfred's hopes for the future. It is said that when Port Alfred was abandoned as a harbour Cecil John Rhodes made the Cape Government a secret offer. He wanted a port for Rhodesia, a "free port"; and if his terms had been accepted he would have taken over the harbour works lock, stock and barrel and made the entrance safe regardless of cost.

Interest in Port Alfred revived during the South African War, when all the ports were congested and an engineer named Methuen reported favourably on the possibilities. Nothing was done. A little work was carried out on the west breakwater between the

world wars but not even a fishing harbour was completed.

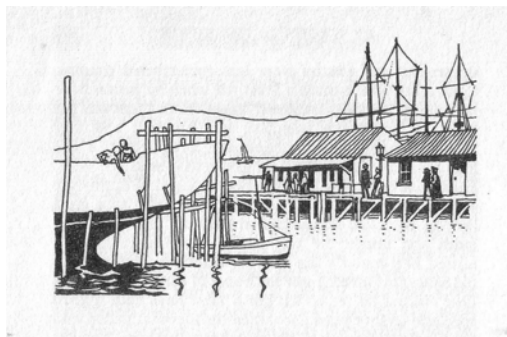
Artists and wet plate photographers have left an interesting panorama of Port Alfred's past. First to settle there was the mysterious English aristocrat Frederick Timpson I'Ons, a flawless painter of landscapes and portraits. He was at Port Alfred in the middle of last century, but photography cut into his earnings in later years. Thomas Bowler painted the Kowie looking seaward. John Roland Brown, a distinguished artist, was painting at Port Alfred early this century.

If you want to take away a genuine souvenir of the Kowie, buy one of the walking-sticks with straight handles made there from local timber. I believe this little industry started during the South African

War, when the men in the refugee camp made these sticks and sold them.

I saw Port Alfred in the ox-wagon era but there were earlier scenes I would like very much to have watched. The shipwrecks and rescues were long remembered dramas. Cock must have created a great stir when his steam flour mill started grinding imported wheat. Then there was the turtle on the beach, weighing one hundred and fifty pounds, bought by a Grahamstown hotel-keeper; a fine load for an ox-wagon. I would like to have seen Mr. W. E. Fairbridge launching his imported racing skiff during the eighties of last century. This tall scholar lived to a great age; he compiled a little-known Africana and newspaper index and taught me the art of historical research. I

missed Berrington's Inn and the Britannia Inn; pubs the old sailormen loved. I saw the bones of the Donald Currie liner *Finland* on the rocks; but it must have been a great spectacle (eighty years ago) when the lifeboats pulled into the Kowie River with all the passengers and crew. Perhaps there are still a few old people who remember the wharves of Port Alfred and the bold seamen who crashed through the double line of breakers on the bar. This is indeed a dubious harbour of desperate adventure.



CHAPTER NINE RIVER HARBOUR

EAST LONDON has often been called “South Africa’s only river port” and this is almost true. Little steamers have used the Berg and the Breede Rivers and the Kowie. But the Buffalo is the only stream that will allow huge passenger liners to berth; a marvel of engineering when you consider past

dramas and disasters at the river mouth.

Here the perils of the sea have been varied by dangerous floods. Down the winding seventy mile course of the Buffalo, at unpredictable intervals, come so-called “freshets” which are really walls of rushing water. Before the river mouth was opened roaring south-east gales drove ships ashore and wrecked them. They were mainly sailing ships at anchor in the open roadstead off East London, waiting to discharge their cargoes. Floods often damaged vessels in the river and sometimes swept them away to destruction. The peaceful East London of today with its breakwater, graving dock and huge turning basin, looks back on many desperate adventures.

Impatient shipmasters of a century ago were tempted to find a way over the

Buffalo River bar. Some crossed safely only to find they could not get out again. Others made for the river because they were in distress and in seeking the shelter of the river they lost their ships. East London had a bad reputation during the long years when sailing ships lay outside, their crews praying the anchors and cables would save them from drifting ashore when the dreaded south-easter blew at gale force. Anthony Trollope the novelist remarked in his book on South Africa that some owners sent ships to East London hoping they would be wrecked.

Portuguese sailors were the first white men to enter the Buffalo, but they were using open boats after their ship had been wrecked during the sixteenth century. Rumours and legends of Phoenician galleys, Arab dhows and

Chinese junks visiting the river have never been confirmed. After the Portuguese came the Dutch, castaways from the wrecked *Stavenisse* who built the small *Centaurus* from the wreckage.

Small craft were creeping through the drifting sandbanks of the Buffalo soon after the middle of last century. For a year at a time the mouth would be closed; then the floods would clear the sand and the little coasters would reach the river port once more. East London had a shipbuilding industry at this period; the coasting cutters *Stoic* and *East London Packet* were launched and sailed along the Cape coast. Later came a team of expert shipwrights, blacksmiths and carpenters from Scotland; they built many fine surf boats and other craft including the steam tug *Agnes* seventy feet

long. Heavy lighters built by these Scots served the port for more than half a century. First steamer to move into the calm waters of the Buffalo was the *Bismarck*, a coaster running between Cape Town and Durban. That was in June 1872, when crossing the bar was still a hazardous adventure.

East London was a collection of one-storey houses in the eighteen-seventies. It was a military station, forwarding depot for the chain of posts stretching along the Kaffrarian frontier; a village with only a few streets. Strand and Smith Streets were there. Toby Street (named after Captain. Toby of the barque that unloaded at the first jetty) became High Street. Captain George Walker, a Scot known as “Old Blueskin”, was port captain for twenty-five years; and in that period he rescued

hundreds of people from drowning. Cargoes were brought into the river by surf boats. The tough, drunken crews who handled these boats knew their worth, laboured when they were in the mood, defied angry ship-masters and threw bottles at “Old Blueskin” when he tried to reason with them. They lived in a row of huts known as “The Ranch” on the west bank and no band of cow-punchers could have been more truculent. Old Billy Button the ferryman loved their wild parties and so the ferry service was often suspended while the surf boat crews were revelling. Yet these were the men who were always ready to risk their lives when ships were driven ashore in heavy weather. “Old Blueskin” and “Big Harry” were great lifeboat skippers and they

handled their steering oars in heavy surf with enormous skill and courage.

The steam tug *Buffalo*, which had cost £3,000, had paddled into the river after a heavy flood; but “Old Blueskin” said she was too large and refused to use her. She was then sold and used as the Robben Island packet. Captain W. C. Jackson was sent to Britain to find a suitable tug and he bought the *London* of seventy-tons. As she could only carry enough coal for two days’ steaming, Jackson rigged her as a sloop and sailed her to East London in sixty-six days. He kept his small supply of coal to bring the tug safely into harbour.

All through these years the list of wrecks grew longer and longer. In the south-east gale of May 26, 1872,

eight ships were driven ashore; the barques *Queen of May* and *Refuge*, the brigs *Sharp*, *Elaine*, *Martha* and *Emma*, the ship *Jane Davies* and the steamer *Quanza*. For three days the captain and his family and the seamen of the *Jane Davies* had to remain lashed to the rigging; then the lifeboat reached them. Years ago I met a seaman who survived that gale. He was James Grenfell, a Cornishman who had served in the *Elaine*. She had a cargo of bantu pots and candles. The master of the *Elaine* tried to enter the river when he saw the danger of shipwreck, but the brig was wrecked inside the bar. Some of the cargo was recovered through a hole in the side. Then the *Elaine* disappeared under the harbour rubble. She lay buried for more than half a century and Grenfell never expected to see her again. He

joined a barque called the *Crixea*, and later in the year of the gale he was wrecked at East London for the second time. After this escape he decided to leave the sea and found work at the harbour. Grenfell saw the first block laid for the breakwater by Sir John Molteno in 1873; and when the turning basin was being excavated in 1929 he was astonished to see the bones of his old ship, the *Elaine*, cooking pots, candles and all. Another ghost ship that came to light at that time was the barque *M. M. Jones*. She waited outside the river for four months in 1876, hoping to enter and discharge her cargo. When she came into harbour at last she was condemned as unseaworthy; and for years she lay on the West Bank as a hulk. Her fittings disappeared, wood-work was carried away until only her

keel timbers remained. Sand and mud covered the *M. M. Jones*, but she, too, was identified during the work on the turning basin.

It was the suction dredger Lucy that started making the Buffalo harbour safer. She cleared the bar in the eighteneighties and paved the way for the entry of the barque *Wolseley*. The captain of the barque received a purse of sovereigns from jubilant East London business men. Before the century ended the Buffalo was sheltering thirty ships at a time.

Floods and wrecks occurred at the same period in the old days. The Buffalo has a dozen feeders, causing a tremendous rush of water during a hot season when thunderstorms cause a deluge. Apparently the greatest floods of last century came during the eighteen-seventies. The river was

impassable. Natives marooned on an island had to be rescued by rocket-line. Trees and huts, boxes and barrels, wagons and watermill wheels, sheep and oxen, swept down to the sea. East London beaches were littered with driftwood. Always there were snakes, especially puff adders, menacing those who were fossicking among the driftwood. Old-timers declared that the flood of July 14, 1874, was the most serious. Five ships were lost, the *Fingo*, *Natal Star*, *Western Star*, *Flora* and the Italian *Nova Bella*; but such was the heroism of the lifeboat crews that only one boy was drowned. These men showed a deep contempt for danger and sometimes they were foolhardy. One lifeboat, the *George Walker* (named in honour of "Old Blueskin"), capsized and broke up on

the Blinders at the Buffalo mouth when the coxs'n failed to take ordinary precautions. Two of the crew were drowned but a whaleboat brought eight back safely.

Over the years a small fleet of hulks grew and lay moored along the Buffalo banks. They seemed to have become almost as permanent as the houses of East London and some were used as houseboats. However, the flood of October 1905 changed that restful picture of old ships ending their careers in the quiet river. After two days of heavy rain inland a white wall of foam raced down the river. It was seven feet high and the current ran at eight knots. East London was taken by surprise. A regatta had just been held but fortunately this had ended when the flood arrived. Parts of the town

were swamped, and a reporter described East London as “a second Venice”. An island was submerged and huts were carried away. Wagon parties camping beside the river lost their wagons and oxen. It was the heaviest flood for more than eighty years and it created havoc among the wooden hulks and small craft moored along the banks. The hulk *New Blessing* was lifted out of the main stream and stranded in the bush. A coal hulk named *Helene* was flung ashore and broken in half. The hulk *Alphen* dragged but remained undamaged. On board the hulk *Inspector* lived a caretaker with his wife and children. When the caretaker saw that the *Inspector* was in danger he put his family on shore and saved the drifting hulk by letting go a spare anchor. Fortunately the S.S.

Clan Stuart (wrecked at Glencairn some years afterwards) was at a wharf; and her crew helped to save various small craft that were being carried past. The hulk *Cerastes* with a man and wife aboard drifted on to the *Clan Stuart* and was secured. A houseboat which had been moored at Second Creek was smashed to matchwood at the river mouth. Flashes of lightning revealed barges, lighters and boats adrift on the swollen river. One barge was thrown up at Bat’s Cave. A coal hulk was wrecked on West Bank. Once again the beach was alive with snakes. One man killed fifty puffadders while the boys of East London captured leguaans and dropped snakes into bottles.

One tragic episode was recorded. Before dawn the crew of the *Clan Stuart* heard a frantic cry for help.

The small tug *Caledonia* had been moored some way up the river with one old man on board as caretaker. This man, Guyer from Heligoland, awoke to find the tug moving swiftly down the river. No one could help him, the tug was carried out to sea, and Guyer and the *Caledonia* were never seen again. They were lost in the wastes of the ocean. Beaches at East London have been covered with wreckage and cargoes since then, rice and coal, maize and timber; and when the *S.S. Valdivia* was lost sixty years ago people helped themselves to thousands of cases of paraffin. But the night of drama that the old hands of today remember was the night of the 1905 flood.

Now and again, once in a generation, perhaps, East London watches a mysterious storm which appears to be

the aftermath of a cyclone far away. On a windless day the sea rises inexplicably until gigantic breakers make the river mouth impassable. Rollers come up from the southeast. Beaches are lashed by the fury of the waves and piled high with foam. The first storm of this sort was recorded more than a century ago. Inside the Buffalo River the rollers were so violent that the schooner *Shrimp* capsized and all on board were drowned. Then the schooner *Elizabeth and Mary* was thrown on her beam-ends and turned over before she could recover.

East London was asleep on a dark and misty night in April 1902 when another heavy sea swept into the river and set every ship's bell clanging. For those on board the vessels outside and within the Buffalo it

must have been a terrifying experience; the weather was fine, yet the ships were behaving as though they were in a gale. At one wharf the S.S. *Winkfield* had discharged horses for the British Government and was ready to leave at daylight. (This was the same cattle-ship that had run down and sunk the Union-Castle liner *Mexican* in fog outside Table Bay two years previously). When the sudden upheaval occurred in the river the master of the *Winkfield* blew his siren and kept on sounding the alarm until the port officials turned out and manned the tugs. They found ships at the wharves ranging wildly and breaking adrift. Two ships, *Mantineia* and *Tottenham*, had been in collision and the stern of the *Mantineia* had been damaged. At the timber wharves the barques *Anita*

and *Cerastes* rolled so violently that their yards and rigging were smashed. The tugs *Buffalo* and *Cecil Rhodes* worked for hours carrying new hawsers to the helpless vessels and bringing them to the wharves. The river was strewn with broken spars and other signs of damage. Outside the harbour the S.S. *Mountley* knocked a hole in the port quarter of the S.S. *Darleydale*, while five other steamers moved out to sea to avoid the risk of being carried ashore by the phenomenal waves. The mail steamer *Dunvegan Castle* arrived from Durban but was unable to embark her passengers until the evening. Then the sea went down and the queer episode ended as suddenly as it had arisen.

East London can never forget its gales and wrecks. According to my

records about ninety ships have been lost at or near East London. Orient Beach saw the end in July 1907 of the Russian sailing vessel *Orient*. She came over the horizon under full sail, then furled her canvas as the tug *Buffalo* approached her. Just before tug and ship entered the river the hawser parted and the *Orient* drifted helplessly on to the beach. Gangs of natives went on board to lighten her by throwing the cargo of wheat overboard, but the effort was unsuccessful. The evil smell of fermented wheat permeated the waterfront. For years the battered hull showed above the breakers. If ever you hear the bell rung at the Cathcart market examine the brass and you will see the name *Orient*.

Quanza, Brighton, Cadwallon and Bonanza streets were all named after

wrecks. Some of the first houses in East London were built at West Bank from the timbers of lost ships; and after a century a few of those houses are still there. And in the cemetery rest those grand seamen who fought the dangerous seas on the Buffalo bar, the survivors of great gales. Many others of that era went to the ocean graveyard.

East London has known other spectacles, other dramas, apart from the floods and shipwrecks. An old resident described to me the scene in late summer many years ago when a large flock of parrots flew over the town. They were Cape parrots, largest of the South African species; yellow birds with green rumps and red-edged wings. Cape parrots flock more readily than the smaller parrots; and East London became aware of them when

an incessant screeching came from the trees. In parts of the town the screaming of the parrots was deafening. Everyone turned out to watch the flocks in the trees; there were so many parrots that the boughs seemed to be weighed down by gorgeous flowers. Some flew into the nets and fences and were killed. Out at the Hood Point lighthouse parrots hit the lantern and became casualties; others sheered off at the last moment. In the morning the lighthouse platform was littered with dead and dying parrots. Parrots were not protected in those days. Trappers snared the birds with nets or injected fruit and berries with brandy so that intoxicated birds were easily caught. There was a time when the Cape parrot became almost extinct. Since the species has been protected the numbers have increased.

Flocks of fifty may be seen in the yellowwood trees of the East London park during the winter months.

A peculiar episode in the East London story was the acute water shortage four years after World War II. After fifteen months of continuous drought the reservoirs dropped to such a low point that it was obvious that the town would soon be waterless. Fortunately there was an oiltanker, the *Athelcrown* bound for the Persian Gulf on her maiden voyage. If she had ever carried oil she would have been useless, for the tanks would have been poisoned by lead tetra-ethyl. The *Athelcrown* was diverted to Durban, and there she loaded fresh water at the special rate of two shillings for one thousand gallons. She ferried water from Durban to East London until the drought broke.

CHAPTER TEN

THE WILD COAST

I was at the wheel of a coaster sweeping northwards with the strong Agulhas current when I first set eyes on Port St. John's. Now and again I raised my eyes cautiously from the compass-card and glanced at the tremendous cleft in the table-topped mountain where the Umzimvubu River sweeps down to the sea. Forest-clad gates opened and shut, opened and shut, as the *Ingerid* passed the lighthouse, the village and the western banks under their primeval forest. The coaster was close inshore. It was superb, this first glimpse of the Wild Coast; but the captain was on the bridge and I was afraid to lift my eyes from the card. Soon he would haul off for the night. I was sixteen, in the grip

of a little adventure of my own choosing. The Wild Coast!

Below thousand foot cliffs the dark green river of St. John was calm as a lagoon. I could imagine the life of the forests on each side of this gateway into Pondoland; bushbuck, wild pigs and blue monkeys, bush babies, louries, rare parrots and rare moths; the huge yellowwood trees, wild medlars with scented blossoms, wild jasmine and orchids; the sugar cane and coffee, paw-paw and custard apples; a sub-tropical paradise moistened by the trade winds of the Indian Ocean. The rich breath of the land came out to me on the bridge of the *Ingerid* that evening and I was grateful. I thought the Portuguese explorers must have been even more excited when they sighted these shores after the weary months at sea.

Bushmen were living in caves along the St. John's River in the days of the Portuguese navigators and there were Hottentots in grass and wattle villages. Many of the river names in the territory are of Khoi-Khoin origin and the Xosa-speaking peoples adopted them when they arrived later. It appears from the narratives of Portuguese castaways, however, that "blacks, very black in colour, with woolly hair" were already settled all along the Wild Coast in the sixteenth century. Pondos are mentioned in a Portuguese document of the late seventeenth century. According to their own traditions, the Xosa, Tembu and others were living on the upper reaches of the Umzimvubu River long before they met the Portuguese on the coast.

Apparently the Portuguese never crossed the bar of the St. John's River in their ships, though they may have used their ships' boats to explore the river. I believe the schooner *Rosebud* from Cape Town was the first to enter the river. That was in 1846 and Captain Duthie sailed fourteen miles upstream to a landing he named Bannockburn. Soon afterwards the schooner *Conch* was wrecked leaving the river; but it was said that her timbers were "rotten as snuff". Another pioneer in the river was the schooner *William Shaw*, built at Durban, the first ship to be registered there. She was launched with tea instead of champagne and was nicknamed "the Teapot". After a useful life of twenty years the *William Shaw* met her end on the St. John's River bar. William Cock's iron

schooner *British Settler* reached a point twelve miles upstream in the middle of last century; and a small vessel named Clara loaded grain there and carried it to Port Elizabeth. Alfred White, an 1820 Settler, was the St. John's trader who encouraged these ships to call. He died in 1870 after spending many years on the river when few white people were seen there. He was on the spot when Sir Walter Currie shot one of the last lions in the neighbourhood. A harbour master was appointed ninety years ago. Probably the first steamer to trade regularly with Port St. John's was the *Alfredia* in the eighteen-eighties. After a number of successful voyages this twin-screw steamer was sighted off the port and the harbourmaster signalled to her to remain outside as there was not enough water on the bar.

Unfortunately the captain of the *Alfredia* was a daredevil who enjoyed making circles in the most dangerous places. He ignored the signal and lost his ship. Somewhere in the deep sand at the river mouth lie the bones of the *Alfredia*.

Later regular traders were the *Umzimvubu*, *Frontier* and *Border*. The Germans sent their small coaster *Adjutant* to the river early this century. I knew a magistrate, Mr. Frank Guthrie, who was there at the time. He had no seafaring experience but he was expected to act as harbourmaster and customs officer. Fortunately he had at his disposal a whaleboat with a Norwegian coxswain and a crew of native police. When the *Adjutant* stuck on the bar Guthrie and his men laid out kedge anchors with the aid of two spans of oxen on the beach. The little

Adjutant came off safely at high tide. This episode has been cited as the only marine salvage operation carried out with the aid of oxen.

Guthrie told me that in his day Port St. John's was a refuge for people who needed a hiding-place. One man was supposed to have been a pirate in China seas; another had committed a murder in Ireland; there was a fairly respectable Arab who had been a waiter at the Hotel Cecil in London. Owing to rock and dense forest St. John's was indeed a secluded corner of the Cape. Travellers came down the river or arrived by sea. Ox-wagons took ten days or more from the port to Umtata. Among the Pondos, however, are some magnificent oarsmen. They load their boats with vegetables and fruit, row against the tide, and often

put up a better performance than boats with outboard motors:

Pondoland was still an independent native state in the eighteen-seventies, for the Cape Colony ended at the Umtata River. The barbaric Pondo territory formed a flourishing market for gun-runners and liquor smugglers. Some adventurers went overland, crossing the Umtamvuna River at Gun Drift; others landed their cargoes on the banks of the St. John's River. Tower muskets and other gimcrack firearms of that period are still treasured in Pondo kraals, and not merely as heirlooms. Police still seize old muzzle-loaders and carbines when faction fights break out. The purchase of land at St. John's by Britain ninety years ago put an end to much smuggling, but there were a few who became more cunning and carried on

the profitable trade. Mr. Frank Brownlee, magistrate and member of the famous missionary family, told me that he knew the trader Elias Thompson (Tomsoni to the natives) who smuggled guns and gin for years under the noses of the police. Thompson transported saplings into Pondoland to replace trees which had been chopped in the natural forest. Every one of Thompson's wagons had contraband hidden under the timber. Caps and leaden bullets were concealed in bags and cases of trade goods. Casks marked "molasses" held brandy. The main camp of the Cape Mounted Rifles was at Port St. John's for years. Troopers kept a sharp look-out but many a little coaster went off with a cargo of bananas after unloading guns. Sigcau, the redoubtable Pondo chief, had a deserter from the British Army

as his armourer. This man would repair an ancient musket in exchange for a fat heifer; and for a suitable fee he would doctor a gun to make it shoot more accurately. He also had a little factory where he made gunpowder from charcoal, sulphur and saltpetre.

Before the British annexation of Pondoland became effective a party of Germans arrived with the intention of gaining a foothold on the St. John's River. Baron Steinacker the leader secured a concession from a chief named Mhlangaso. Steinacker was a renowned drinker and when he landed with his followers at St. John's he brought with him enough wine, beer, liqueurs and groceries to keep a small army going. At first the Germans appeared to be peaceful traders and they bought a trading station fifteen miles inland. Soon afterwards they

paraded in uniform and hoisted the German flag. However, they soon discovered that Mhlangaso was an inferior chief and that only Sigcau had the right to sell concessions, so they set fire to their illegal outpost of the Kaiser's empire and departed. To this day the spot near the Umzimvubu River mouth where the Germans first landed is called Germany.

St. John's is a name that goes back a long way and the origin is controversial. It was marked on the oldest Portuguese charts as Sao Christovao; but it was probably changed to Sao Joao after the wreck of the galleon Sao Toao near there in the middle of the sixteenth century. However, there is an alternative theory. A rocky pinnacle standing out from a cliff at the entrance does bear a strong resemblance to a robed human figure; and it

is said that a Portuguese priest saw St. John the Evangelist in this natural statue. Later visitors who have studied the face on the west bank buttress agree that it has a remarkably human likeness, but one clergyman found it "evil rather than saintly".

Umzimvubu, the river on which St. John's stands, means "home of the hippo". It is, perhaps, the grandest river mouth in all Africa; but the last hippo was shot eighty years ago. (One of the last was almost a record, thirteen and a half feet in length). Those were great days when the Pondos were able to feast on the luscious meat of hippos killed in groves of wild bananas. Stray hippo swam down the coast from Natal early this century; but the last of these migrants entered the Umzimvubu in 1929, the celebrated Huberta. Natives

thought the spirit of Chaka had returned and saw that she went unharmed; then a white man's bullet ended the strange odyssey. The Umzimvubu is still the home of man-eating sharks and natives have been killed six miles from the mouth. Stand on the eastern heights when the water is clear and you will see the sharks lying on the bottom like torpedoes waiting for a target.

Cape Hermes at the river entrance, where the lighthouse was built, took its name from H.M.S. *Hermes*, a ship that surveyed the coast long ago. Mount Thesiger and Mount Sullivan, guarding the entrance, remind us of General Thesiger who hoisted the British flag in Pondoland nearly a century ago, and Commodore Sullivan, the naval officer who brought the troops up the river at the time of the

annexation. These names are seldom heard in the village, however, as residents usually speak of "the Gates of St. John's".

Among the residents of Port St. John's between the wars was an old Zulu who was a member of the impi which attacked the Pondos near the precipice now known as Execution Rock. This has a face nine hundred feet high, rising close to the river. The Pondos, knowing the terrain, laid a trap for the Zulus; they set fire to the bush and drove their enemies over the precipice. Three Zulus escaped, including the old man in the village. Execution Rock saw the end of many Pondos who had been condemned to death as sorcerers. The Rev. Godfrey Callaway traced a marvellous survival at the grim spot; a sorcerer who bounced off a projecting rock and

fell into deep water. The chief sent out search parties but the man hid until nightfall and then found sanctuary with a rival chief. In the bush at the foot of Execution Rock many broken skeletons have been found.

One of the events of the year at St. John's is the "sardine run". This is something of a mystery. Scientists cannot tell us why the hordes of pilchards arrive from the deep ocean in the middle of June every year, always reaching the coast between the Bashee River and St. John's. Often the Cape Hermes lighthouse keepers are the first to report the immense shoals. But the seabirds also know the fish are coming; and the birds are seen first, heading south in great ravenous flights.

From the cliffs the sardine shoals appear on the blue water like brown or silver islands. It is a tremendous spectacle. One such "island" of fish may cover five square miles and contain fifty thousand tons of fish. Schools of porpoises, sharks and game fish attack the pilchard millions and turn the ocean into a battlefield. Sharks and seabirds gorge to such an extent that they are washed ashore bloated and helpless. And still the shoals approach the coast like cloud shadows on the surface, rising and falling with the swell, the water boiling as bonito and barracuda tear into the flanks and drive their prey inshore.

All along the coast the pilchards are herded into shallow water. Offices shut down, schools are closed when the fish are stranded in thousands.

Everyone is on the beach with sacks and buckets. Anglers bring their rods and land barracuda and kingfish easily. Sometimes a warning cry goes up, for the sharks are there in the shallows with the fish. They call them sardines, but these seven-inch silvery cigars are very different from those that come in tins with olive oil. Nevertheless, these Indian Ocean pilchards are so rich that they can be fried without fat. Commander Z. Marsh, a retired Royal Navy officer who lived at St. John's for many years, always deplored the waste of fish; he wanted to see them caught for humans, not left to the voracious birds and other fish. Commander Marsh explained the pilchard migration mystery in this way; he thought the fish spawned to the south of the Cape and the buoyant eggs were nurtured through

the fry stage in meadows of plankton. Warm currents brought the fish northwards past St. John's and the migration continued until the shoals vanished off Durban. This theory has been challenged by people who believe the pilchards spawn about fifty miles off Pondoland. At all events the sardine run is one of the great sights of the Wild Coast.

Ordinary fishing often becomes extraordinary at St. John's, for one brindle bass caught in the river weighed nearly four hundred pounds and a rock cod weighed three hundred and seventy five pounds. You can hook a forty-pound *kabeljou* at the river mouth. But please remember the ordeal of an angler named Jeffreys who took his rod to the place now known as Jeffreys' Rocks. His boat came adrift and was carried out to sea.

Jeffreys was marooned on the rock for three days with only his rod to keep the hippos at bay. Coloured fishermen, experts who know the weather and the ways of the big fish, have made a living at Port St. John's without using nets. Seldom elsewhere does a rod provide even a bread and butter income. Anglers at Port St. John's carry off the prizes in fishing contests.

Wild Coast! Tales and legends, truth and folklore and rumours are as romantic as the name. It is a coast of ghosts and witchcraft, mysterious shipwrecks, sunken treasure and unexpected flotsam. Names along the coast have the true ring of adventure. Port St. John's is the unofficial "capital" of the Wild Coast and in the village you hear all sorts of stories which differ from the versions known to the outside world.

They tell you the *Waratah* foundered near Port St. John's and this is probably true. Air crews have noted a dark mass on the sea-bed which is not marked on the charts. It is said that natives picked up a lifebuoy with the name *Waratah* painted on it and tried to sell it to a trader. But there was no wireless in those days, the newspapers arrived a week late at the lonely stores of the Wild Coast, and the trader had not heard the *Waratah* was overdue. When the news reached him it was impossible to trace the lifebuoy or the natives. However, the trader is said to have made a sworn statement to the police; natives had not only picked up a lifebuoy but they declared they had seen the liner sinking off the Bashee River mouth.

Long ago, in the 'eighties of last century, a police patrol found the stern

of a wooden ship on a Wild Coast beach. The name *John Booth* stood out in white letters. There was no other wreckage. Nothing was ever heard of the crew. Coffee Bay, near the Umtata River mouth, is now a flourishing little holiday resort. In the eighteen-sixties, when a ship was wrecked there with a cargo of coffee, there was just the beach. Traders went down to the coast with wagons, fished and drank rum from the wreck, and shared out the bags of coffee beans. Some of the beans were thrown away but they took root along the shore; so that Coffee Bay became a most appropriate name.

Mazeppa Bay, near the Qolora mouth to the west of Port St. John's, was the anchorage where the coasting schooner *Mazeppa* landed cargoes in the eighteen-thirties. She had been a slaver, a little ship with a bad reputa-

tion, but she served a useful purpose when she picked up survivors of Louis Trichard's trek at Delagoa Bay. Behind the bay is the Manubi forest. Giant *Strelitzia augustifolias* grow along the coast with their strange blue and white flowers and leaves like bananas. Cycads are found here, the bantu-bread trees belonging to the remote past. Many of the hundred-foot yellowwood trees have been cut down but there are still giants in this Wild Coast jungle; Cape mahogany and ironwoods, sneezewood and red stinkwood. Botanists revel among the sub-tropical rarities which are found only to the east of the Great Kei River. Twenty miles to the north-east of Port St. John's is the abandoned site known as Port Grosvenor. It never was a port, and it is about ten miles south of the *Grosvenor* wreck at the Umsikaba

river mouth. This was another Wild Coast settlement with a story. At this anchorage Captain Sidney Turner landed cargoes in the eighteneighties, when Chief Mqikela granted him a concession in the hope that Port Grosvenor would become a rival to Port St. John's. Turner put up a group of wooden houses. His tiny steamers *Lady Wood* and *Lion* called regularly with freight from Durban and it was landed in lighters. The venture failed but Captain Turner dynamited the rocks in the neighbourhood and found about eight hundred gold and silver coins. Venetian ducats and gold star pagodas were recovered with Indian silver rupees. Turner also found nine cannon, pistol and musket bullets, crockery, brass ornamental work, glass stoppers, buttons, a gold clasp bearing the initials J.S.C., a copper plate with

the name Buttall and many other relics. This find was the origin of the *Grosvenor* treasure hunts that went on for years near the Tezani River mouth. It is now clear from discoveries at the Umsikaba River mouth that Turner never touched the *Grosvenor* treasure. His coins must have come from one or more of the other wrecks near Port Grosvenor. However, the Turner treasure was substantial, and he left to his descendants a large silver cup made from some of the coins he had gathered.

Port St. John's and the Wild Coast are museums of wreck relics. Many of these fascinating little historic treasures will never be traced to their origins; others may be identified with fair accuracy. Thousands of beads have been dug out of the beaches or scooped up from rock pools. They are

known as "*Grosvenor* beads" and some undoubtedly formed part of her cargo; but the beads have been recovered along the whole Wild Coast, proving that they must have been spilled out of a number of wrecks. Many of the beads are pleasing red or yellow cornelians. They are mainly diamond-shaped, or cylinders two inches in length, or flat. India was the home of cornelian mining a few centuries ago and these Wild Coast cornelians were obviously native cut and polished with primitive tools. Mr. and Mrs. Denis Godfrey, who presented a matched string of twenty of these cornelians to the Africana Museum in Johannesburg, suggested that they were the "red beads of Cambaya" which the Portuguese traded with the people of Sofala in exchange for gold. Very similar

beads have been found on the lower clay floors at Zimbabwe. Many of the Wild Coast beads are so crude, however, that they may be as old as the Phoenician explorers or the early Egyptian, Persian or Arab navigators. Cornelian is an extremely hard stone. Wild Coast cornelians are found with drillholes at both ends; but the craftsman sometimes failed to bore far enough to enable the beads to be strung.

Treasure Island at the Umsikaba River mouth has yielded a number of beads and other relics. This is the *Grosvenor* wreck site, so that the Treasure Island beads are probably genuine "*Grosvenor* beads". The flat, rocky islet is half-covered by the sea at high tide. During the centuries many small fragments of the cargo had been washed into holes in the

rocks. Mrs. Nina Elliot made an impressive collection of Nanking china of the Ming period (1368-1644) during thirty years of searching at this spot. The coarse blue china suffered heavily after the pounding of the sea and only one complete plate was recovered. Celadon china, greyish-green in colour, has come to light at the same place. This is older than Ming and is not usually found south of Zanzibar. Mrs. Frances Hamilton, who investigated the Treasure Island finds, thought the Celadon might have been carried by a Chinese junk that was lost there long before Diaz rounded the Cape. She pointed out that the South Sand Bluff (close to the Umsikaba River mouth) was a landmark known to the explorers. It was then a dazzling white cliff; and

some came in too close to fix their position and were wrecked. Fragments of red earthenware water jars (known as *zeers*) such as the Arabs used for storing water have also come to light on Treasure Island; so Arab dhows may have left their bones on, the rocks among the other victims. China and beads are often found on the island. The rarities have been diamond rings. A silver button with the monogram C.N., may have been owned by Charles Newman, a *Grosvenor* passenger.

Rusty old cannon are the largest of the Wild Coast wreck relics. Port St. John's has one in the public gardens; and there is a bell from some unknown wreck. A more recent historic relic which was rescued from a marble quarry near Port St. John's was South Africa's first locomotive, the engine

named *Natal* that ran from Durban to the Point in 1860. It had a wide-mouthed American smokestack, green body and copper wheels.

Close to Port St. John's, across the river and below Hobson's farm, is another place where beads are recovered by delving into the sea silt. This is Agate Beach. The amber-coloured beads are four or five-sided and bored for stringing. Most of them are about half an inch in diameter. Bead collectors work at spring tides and though the supply of agates is never plentiful it seems to be inexhaustible. Mr. C. R. Prance, an author who lived at Port St. John's for years, was convinced that the beads came from the Portuguese galleon that gave the village its name. Gold has been mined near Agate Beach, though without much success. Prehistoric

remains are found in caves along this coast.

Rame Head to the south of St. John's is a bold and precipitous headland easily identified from seawards. Here, according to native legend, white men landed long ago and left a monument; probably a reference to a stone pillar or *padrao* such as the Portuguese set up along the shores of Africa to mark their achievements and serve as landmarks for those who followed. Expeditions have searched for the Rame Head *padrao*, but so far in vain.

Along the Wild Coast round about Port St. John's live natives with strange ancestors. It has been proved beyond doubt that these little clans are descendants of Portuguese and Dutch, British and Indian castaways of the sixteenth century onwards. Possibly the foreign blood goes all the way

back to the Phoenicians and Arabs. A Pondoland legend describes raids and invasions by men with flowing garments armed with muskets; obviously Arab slave traders.

At one time the so-called “pale-faced natives of Pondoland” were regarded as the offspring of *Grosvenor* survivors who mated with the local people. Some of the unhappy *Grosvenor* exiles certainly added to the members of the weird clans but the racial mixing started very much earlier. Of course there are thousands of Pondoland coloured people who are of fairly recent origin. Army deserters, elephant hunters, criminals, outlaws and other dubious characters found a refuge there early last century. Some of the first white traders married daughters of chiefs to maintain friendly relations. Often

there was a danger of a store being attacked when a trader pressed a chief to pay his debts, and such marriages were regarded as a form of fire insurance. However, the white strain in Pondoland goes right back to the Portuguese shipwrecks.

Sixty castaways from the Dutch East Indiaman *Stavenisse* spent months on the Wild Coast before they were rescued and they, too, became fathers of half-castes almost a century before the *Grosvenor* wreck. Again and again in the narratives of survivors you hear of men who refused to be rescued and they remained on the Wild Coast with their native wives. White people were at first regarded by the natives as rather strange sea monsters; yet they were often well-treated. Castaways from a French ship, lost on the Wild Coast at the

same period as the *Stavenisse*, were murdered with the exception of a French youth, Guillaume Chenut. He was wounded and left for dead. A Xosa chief befriended Chenut and sheltered him for a year. Chenut learnt the Xosa language and heard from the tribesmen that a band of white castaways were living not far away. He was an unwilling exile, yearning for civilisation. The castaways were *Stavenisse* men and in due course the Dutch ship *Centaurus* found and rescued them. Chenut sailed away thankfully but three *Stavenisse* survivors preferred to live out their lives among the natives on the Wild Coast.

The adventures of the Portuguese castaways are fully documented. First there was the galleon *Sao Joao* in the middle of the sixteenth century,

homeward bound from India. The records state that she was worth a million in gold, “for so richly laden a ship had not left India since it was discovered”. She stranded near the Umzimvubu River mouth “two cross-bow shots from the shore”. Nearly two hundred Portuguese and three hundred slaves reached the shore. Some marched to Delagoa Bay, others were left at various places along the coast. Soon afterwards the *San Bento* was wrecked at the Umtata River mouth. Survivors made tents of rich carpets, gold cloth and silk. Again there was a desperate march along the coast; a hundred Portuguese and two hundred slaves making for Delagoa Bay, living on shellfish and wild bananas. They passed the *Sao Joao* wreck and found a Bengalese survivor who refused to join the *San Bento* party. This was in

the neighbourhood of Port St. John's; and here two weary Portuguese and thirty slaves deserted from the column and settled in Pondoland. The column marched on and encountered more *Sao Joao* people; a Moslem named Gasper, two slaves, and then a Portuguese. According to the records "he was naked, having been for three years exposed to the cold and heat of those parts, so that his colour and appearance had so altered that there was no difference between him and the natives".

Another wreck near the Umtata River mouth was the *Santo Alberto*, almost at the end of the sixteenth century. Her men carried mats and chests of food on shore and sheltered under oriental carpets and quilts. Again many of the three hundred survivors remained in Pondoland rather than face the dangers

of the hungry journey to Delagoa Bay. There were more Portuguese disasters during the seventeenth century, and these castaways encountered fellow-countrymen who had been living in Pondoland for years. Among those who were abandoned by the marchers were women (including nuns) who could not keep up with the columns. A Jesuit priest remained with one family of castaways. But most of the tough Portuguese wished to see Lisbon again and they pushed on relentlessly. Mutineers were beheaded, thieves were tortured and hanged.

After the *Stavenisse* wreck the galiot *Noord* was sent in search of survivors. Three of the men they rescued (in 1688) reported that they had met a Portuguese survivor of the *Nossa Senhora da Atalaya* wreck. He had lived among the Pundos for more

than forty years. "This man had been circumcised and had a wife and children, cattle and land", they declared. "He spoke only the African language, having forgotten everything, his God included".

William Hubberley, a young sailor who was among the *Grosvenor* survivors, wrote a journal in which he described a clan of natives who treated the white people with great kindness. He did not mention white women living among them; but these were undoubtedly people of mixed blood. By the time Jacob van Reenen reached Pondoland with the second *Grosvenor* rescue expedition there were four hundred coloured people in one clan, known as the Abelungu, the "white people". Lady Anne Barnard mentioned the half-castes in her writings. Dr. Heinrich Lichten-

stein, the German traveller, and George Thompson, the Cape Town merchant, both mentioned rumours of these clans of castaways.

Fynn the elephant hunter met the half-caste chief Faku, son of a *Grosvenor* survivor. Fynn also wrote of "an English lady of remarkable beauty" who had died in Pondoland before his arrival. Reliable accounts of these strange clans were written by the first missionaries Shaw and Shrewsbury in the eighteen-twenties. They were assisted by a rascal named Nicolaas Lochenberg, a hunter who had a native harem and had lived in the country for twenty years. He led the missionaries to the kraal of Mdepa, chief of the light-skinned clan living near the present Coffee Bay resort. Mdepa was then a frail old man; but he was delighted at the

sight of the white missionaries and told them the most remarkable story of the whole castaway saga. Mdepa had blue eyes, a long straight nose and a lighter skin than his followers. When he was asked why he lived near the sea he replied: "Because it is mother. From thence I sprang and from thence I am fed when I am hungry."

Mdepa was a son of Bessie "the white queen of Pondoland". The Rev. Basil Holt, historian of the Transkei, authority on many phases of native life, investigated the story of Bessie in recent years but found that many details had been lost in the mists of time. According to one tradition some Pondos were on the beach near the Lambaso River mouth after a night of storm when a white girl, aged about seven, ran towards them calling her

name - "Bessie! Bessie!" There had been a shipwreck, but no one has ever discovered the name of the ship or the date. Holt thought it was between 1730 and 1750.

Professor P. R. Kirby, the authority on the *Grosvenor* and many other "Wild Coast" episodes, heard another account of Bessie's dramatic arrival. She had landed from a small boat with several slaves, black people with long hair. There was no white man in the boat. Yet another version gathered by Holt mentioned three white men named Jekwa, Hatu and Badi; and it was suggested that Badi was Bessie's father and that he left Pondoland when a ship called and offered him a passage. Some writers have linked Bessie with the *Bennebroek*, the Dutch ship lost in 1713 near the spot where the *Grosvenor* broke up seventy years

afterwards. This is impossible as Bessie died in 1815 near where Port St. John's now stands, a whitehaired old woman but not a centenarian. Kirby assumed that Bessie was the child of English parents travelling to or from India, and that her Indian nursemaid and other servants may also have survived the wreck. Bessie was brought up in the kraal of one Gambushe and became known to the Pondos as Gquma, meaning "the roaring of the sea". She combed her long black hair, using brushes and combs saved from the wreck. Her guardians presented her with three white cows and gave her all the white calves born after her arrival. Bessie first married a Pondo chief named Tshomane, but had no children. After the death of Tshomane she married another chief, Sango, and had eight

children. She reigned for more than half a century as *Inkosikazi* or queen and was loved by all.

Bessie was in all probability the white woman Van Reenen met at the Umgazana mouth during his search. There he found a village and gardens planted with bananas and peaches, kaffir corn, plantains, maize and beans. Van Reenen said the people were descended from whites, slaves of mixed blood and people from the East Indies. He offered some of the women help in reaching Cape Town and at first they agreed; but later they refused to leave their children and grandchildren. The Rev. Stephen Kay, a Methodist missionary who worked in Pondoland in the eighteenth-twenties, believed that the sweet potato came from the wreck when Bessie was cast on shore, and was

cultivated by the natives who adopted Bessie. Kay gathered that Bessie was regarded as prophet. Her people declared: "The word of Gquma was a great word."

Tomsoni, an old Abelungu who had taken the name of the trader Thompson, informed the Rev. Basil Holt that a branch of his tribe had settled at the Xora River mouth. There was an island between two branches of the river and this could be reached only by boat. The Abelungu planted bananas and peaches there, but Tomsoni could not say where they had secured the peaches. Holt thought the use of a boat, and the peaches, were signs of the foreign origin of the Abelungu.

So it is clear that the *Grosvenor* wreck was responsible for only a small infusion of white blood in

Pondoland compared with previous episodes. Professor Kirby traced a coloured man named Robert Saunders, living at Gun Drift on the Umtamvuma River, who is almost certainly a descendant of the Robert Saunders of the *Grosvenor*, then a child of about eight who was left in the care of a friendly tribe. Two little girls who survived the wreck, Eleanor Dennis, aged three, and Mary Wilmot, seven, appear to have been the daughters of Englishmen and Indian mothers. Their descendants may be living in Pondoland unrecognised. Professor Kirby has pointed out that the wives of survivors were not separated from their husbands and left in native kraals. The only other possible *Grosvenor* descendants might be traced back to John Bryan the black-

smith, who remained at the wreck site and made assegais for the natives; and Joshua Glover, a sailor, who was left behind because of his mental condition. George Cato the explorer found a half-caste male near the *Grosvenor* site in the middle of last century, but this man appears to have been a grandson of Bessie.

Holt encountered members of the Abelungu clan who showed clear signs of foreign blood. Some had a yellow skin tinge; one had the appearance of a Red Indian; another was a light copper colour. He learnt that years ago the Xosa used to point at the Abelungu and say: "They are Englishi". Holt met Dalingozi, chief of the Tshomane, one of Bessie's direct descendants; but he showed no evidence of white blood. His skin was black and he had African features and hair. Dalingozi could tell

Holt nothing of his white ancestress. Holt thought it strange to reflect that this chief probably had distant relations living in Britain. "Such is our knowledge of Bessie, the poor little white waif of a storm at sea, who was cast up on our coast and made the best of the harsh circumstances into which 'outrageous fortune' thrust her", Holt summed up. "It is one of the strangest stories ever to come out of Africa and tantalising because we know so little where we would fain, know so much more."

Sir Walter Stanford, another authority on Transkei history, said that the descendants of *Stavenisse* sailors formed a separate clan in the present Elliotdale district, Bomvanaland. He gathered that Bessie's wreck was at the Umneno river mouth in Western Pondoland. Bessie's daughters were

famous in the territory for their charm and beauty; and one of them Nonibe, used her influence to protect missionaries and traders in time of trouble.

Ninety years ago the Rev. W. A. Soga, a clergyman of mixed blood, tried to discover the origins of the Abelungu, but even then he could gather only vague information. One old man named Zali declared: "We came out of the sea. We are not a black people - there is white blood in our veins. Many years ago a vessel was wrecked at the Lwambasa River mouth beyond St. John's. A house was built by the people from the wreck where they came on shore, and parts of the wreck were still to be seen in recent times. Pondos went there for scraps of iron for their assegais. We do not know the nationality of our ancestors."

Mr. A. J. Lawlor of Nkanya, Elliotdale, informed me recently that there are hundreds of Abelungu in his area. "It is their general belief that they are descendants of *Grosvenor* people, but I have my doubts", Mr. Lawlor wrote. "I think they come from an earlier shipwreck. A large number of them resemble our South African Indians and unlike the natives of this coastal strip they are keen on cultivating market produce."

Precisely. Portuguese and Dutch, British and Indian castaways, all helped to form the strange Pondoland clans but it is too late now to draw up the family trees.



CHAPTER ELEVEN POINT ROAD

POINT ROAD was just about all I saw of Durban during my first visit more than half a century ago, but it was a road to remember. I was free to roam Point Road only in the evenings for I was at work in a little coasting steamer *Ingerid* all day; polishing brass on the bridge, scrubbing and cleaning while the winches rattled and the barrels of

whale oil loaded at Saldanha swung out of the holds and clanged on the wharf. That was my way of spending the long school holidays and it taught me more than my schoolmasters had done.

One evening I was passing out of the dock gates at the old Criterion Hotel when I was hailed by John Black, the chief steward. He was leading a party of my shipmates into the bar and I was invited to join them. The bo'sun was there and the second engineer, both Norwegians; and Hoffman the second steward had come along wearing a black morning coat and striped trousers. (He was a young Jewish tailor who had gone to sea in a moment of sheer lunacy, and stayed there). I was a little nervous in such distinguished company and at the age of sixteen I found the atmosphere of

waterfront bars rather too adventurous. However, I drank a pint of beer very, very slowly and noted the growing joviality of my companions. After a few rounds they decided to move on. In my innocence I thought they had quenched their thirsts. I felt relieved, but not for long.

Point Road had more than a touch of Scandinavia in these days and my Norwegian shipmates met a number of friends. I recall a whaling company's office, the aptly named Cafe Viking, a ship chandler named Torkildsen, and a Norcap Cafe run by Mrs. Johansen; all places where I listened enthralled to the bubbling good humour, the gay lilting accents and rhythm of the Norwegians. Sad and dour they might appear to be at sea, but now all their moodiness had gone and they were enjoying the

blessings of the land. Brazenly they ogled the girls and like giants they drank.

Among our ports of call that night were the Drumcree, the Alexandra and the Bencorrum bars. I was allowed, as a merciful concession to my age, to switch to ginger beer. That night formed chapter one in my experience of bars, barmen and barmaids. It gave me a sentimental outlook on Point Road and I went back there often in later years to fill the gaps in my education. Yes, my shipmates knew the bars of the world and they started me on an endless quest. Perhaps it was John Black's story of Hell Cat Peggy that set my youthful imagination at work. She was a barmaid who dealt with an ill-behaved customer by seizing his ear between her teeth and dragging him

outside. According to Black she bit some ears right off and kept them in jars of alcohol on a shelf in the bar as a warning to others; but this, I think, was a magnificent piece of embroidery. John Black's characters had wonderful resounding names; Mother McBride and Pop Levinsky, Big Mose, Chuck Murphy, Dutch Karl and Liverpool Mary. They were all stars in the saloon world I had only just entered. As the years passed I gathered the rules, the code and the legends of that glittering stage behind the long mahogany counter; the stage with great mirrors and sparkling glasses and swinging doors; a stage where the human voices might be happy or angry, but where other sounds come in relentlessly; the crash and jangle of cash registers, the fizzing siphons, rattle and roll of dice. Some

bars have happier aromas than others. Malt and hops you have a right to expect, sweet and moist; but the bars that glow in the memory are those where clients are regaled with fish-balls and fragrant stews, pretzels and spring onions. Given this background and the right bartender or barmaid and a bar becomes a bulwark against loneliness and a sanctuary from the world.

I was a schoolboy in Point Road but instead of wickedness I smelt freedom. Even then I saw the friendly barmaid as a wise and sympathetic creature with an understanding which had not been gained in drawing-rooms. Here one could come with all sorts of problems and return to the hard world mellow and decided. If you wanted an alcoholic remedy for a stomach-ache the genius behind the bar would hand

you a raw egg in sherry. Cramp was treated with peppermint in whisky. The barman would attempt to cure an aching tooth or forecast the results of future horseraces. He presided as referee in frequent disputes, held stakes or acted as banker; and in selected cases he would even advance money until pay day. Yet I saw the comforter of one moment suddenly become the man of action; one hand on the bar and he vaulted over like an acrobat to deal with a disturbance that had gone too far. Yes, I saw the "bum's rush" carried out with great efficiency that night in Point Road.

Barmaids, the right sort of barmaids, are born into the trade. The girl who has known every customer from childhood takes charge of her counter with outward camaraderie and the skill of a psychiatrist. She is pouring your

favourite drink even before you have closed the door; and if liquid solace is not enough then she will settle your domestic worries or affairs of the heart as easily as she polishes the glasses.

John Black also had a few words to say about bar parrots. He declared that the Point Road hotels had known some of the most talkative and wittiest parrots of all time. I heard about the Drumcree parrot that could whistle a psalm without a false note or sing a military march. The only parrot I met that night was an idiotic creature at the Bencorrum; it spoke in a hysterical voice, swung by the feet and ejaculated in a queer falsetto: "Scratch my belly boy - scratch my belly." Obviously the parrots of other days had been more amusing. Why, long ago there was a parrot at the Criterion that would come down from its perch,

select a generous seaman at the counter and inquire politely: "How about a snifter for Poll eh? Bottoms up and to hell with the barman." This parrot was susceptible to changes in the weather and acted as a barometer in the bar. It could imitate a gesture, dance to a tune, leap and skip on its perch and denounce the barmaid in proper seafaring language.

Between frequent visits to bars John Black led the way into a "dime museum". Here indeed was a museum such as I had never imagined. My critical faculties were so poorly developed that I gaped at the fake mermaid (half monkey, half fish) and asked one of my shipmates whether such creatures were really to be found in the sea. I saw the crude wax figure of a man in the electric chair; alleged photographs of life on the moon; stuffed birds and

crocodiles; a calf with two heads and six legs; pictures of celebrated freaks, Tom Thumb and the Siamese Twins. Then we paid something extra and watched a flea circus. I understand there are highly-trained fleas capable of racing in miniature chariots or playing in a football match. The fleas we saw that night had not reached such heights of showmanship. The flea master handed round a number of his pets in small boxes with magnifying glasses as lids. One realised for the first time that each insect of torment had a beak and six powerful legs. "Would any gentleman like to volunteer to feed a flea?" asked the flea master suddenly.

The bo'sun rolled up his sleeve and offered a hairy arm decorated with a tattooed python. Thanks to a powerful magnifier we observed the flea turning

away in disgust. There were no more volunteers. After that the flea master coaxed his performers until they operated a tiny merry-go-round, danced to music and jumped through hoops. We heard tales of marvellous fleas that could juggle with balls; unfortunately they had died just before the show opened. "Must have been feeding off the bo'sun," remarked John Black. All hands then drifted away to slake their own thirsts once more.

As time went by my shipmates remembered that it was five hours or more since Charlie our cook had served them with his excellent stewed beef and macaroni dish. Where to go? Mrs. Smith's Cabin Grill was closed; so were the Addington tea room, the Marine Club, the Bijou, the Manchester House, the Mascot and

other Point Road cafes. John Black thought deeply and announced: "Pat d'Hara runs a late place - he'll give us anything we want." Pat O'Hara was not running one of Durban's most exclusive restaurants but I would have been sorry if I had missed the place. When I could see through the smoke I recognised it as an eating-house for men from the ships. Their weathered faces and shabby clothes proclaimed their occupation; faces that belonged not only to the seafaring races of Europe. A few Chinese seamen were enjoying their tea and the easy-going O'Hara had also served American mulattoes and a group of Filipinos.

O'Hara came over to us, a heavily-built man with a merry face. Black asked him what he would give us. "Oi've two cooks here, a Zulu and an Indian, and between them they can fix

almost any dish under the sun,” O’Hara replied. “Oi savvy the dago grub and the Dansk, oi give the Greeks their *moussaka* and the wops a whiff of garlic. Oi can bolo Hindustani bat and make a real *biriani*. Any kind of spigotty or squarehead dish my cooks can do. Oi feed Frenchies and Portugooses, Scotchmen and Russkies. But at this toime of night it’s ham and eggs or Oirish stew. What d’you say boys?”

I was ready for my bunk after the platter of ham and eggs O’Hara put in front of me. All too soon, I knew, the enormous binnacle on the bridge would be calling for its daily polish. Thankfully I rolled on board the coaster with my shipmates and dreamt of the delights of Point Road.

Point Road has been transformed since my first visit. Old hands say it is not

so respectable now as it was half a century ago; but it depends on what you call respectable. I see that the Criterion has gone, the only hotel in the world that had its own customs’ gate and a passage running through the premises from the docks to Point Road. It took the authorities about a century to seal off that loophole with a wire-mesh barrier. Then the old hotel, with all its memories, closed for ever.

I miss the anchorage beacon, too, a landmark eighty feet high that stood for half a century. Probably I would search in vain for that interesting little shop at the corner where Point Road turned into West Street, the shop I knew as a boy. It was called Bingham’s Corner Emporium and it offered liquorice and shell-decorated work-boxes, man-o’-war caps, Victorian bonnets and acid drops. So

much has vanished that I often wonder how long Dead Man's Tree will survive. Durban will never be as romantic, as full of unexpected encounters, as it was that night in Point Road when I was sixteen. Men who boasted they could empty a fire bucket filled with beer are not to be found every day. Parrots that drank jorums of rum and swore in five languages are rare birds. Waterfront cooks who could produce anything from pepper-pot soup to Mexican tamales were unusual craftsmen. (I went back to O'Hara's place a few years afterwards and saw his faithful Zulu making Cornish pasties while the Indian was busy with a fish chowder). Those were wonderful times when I felt the magic of the "dime museum" long before I had realised that life is an inexplicable museum of curiosities.

Nevertheless I shall return to Point Road one night and think of all the people I glimpsed there; natives and Indians in the Boating Company's compound, stevedores, water police, ostrich feather sellers, Teifel the diver, the Chinese laundrymen. And I shall find out whether old Port Natal lingers in the shadows. When night settles over Point Road I shall try to visualise the bay of sand dunes and bush, the jungle of palm trees and wild bananas, where an unknown Englishman lived with his native wives and children early in the eighteenth century. I shall imagine the slavers coming in and finding victims; better slaves than those of Madagascar, "stronger and blacker." Here, too, a buccaneer settled, calling himself "a penitent pirate who sequestered himself from his abominable community and retired

out of harm's way." This was once a swampy lagoon of shipwrecks and castaways. In the eighteen-thirties came the trading brig *Dove* to land spirits. The whole settlement was drunk for days. Here, in the middle of last century, wild elephants roamed among the new brick cottages and wattle and daub shacks. On the Berea a settler was killed by a leopard. Lions visited the Bluff and the floods brought crocodiles to the creeks.

Yet the London Tavern held a ball in the midst of these invasions. The widow Quested opened the thatched Kentish Tavern opposite the Phoenix Hotel in West Street, while Drew's Tavern in Grey Street offered music, dancing, skittles and boxing. Fleets of sailing ships anchored in the open roadstead and lay there pitching their bows under while cargoes were

brought to the beaches in surf boats. Coaches set off from the Britannia Inn for Maritzburg. Someone bought the Star and Garter for two hundred and fifty pounds. Durban was still largely a village of wood or tin bungalows a century ago, shaded by syringas and fig trees; a town of yoked oxen where wagons had to be hauled out of reedy swamps. Transport riders had their outspan at the far end of West Street; there they exchanged hides, wool and grain for bullets, sugar and coffee. Ivory and pumpkins were piled high under the bamboos. Horse trams arrived, and oil lamps for homes and streets. Sailors played skittles on the beaches and drank at the Fig Tree Canteen.

Even at the turn of the century Durban was still a small town. Only in 1904 did the first mail steamer cross the bar.

Long cavalcades of natives carried baskets of coal on their heads to fill the bunkers. Few realised that on one day in World War II more than one hundred merchant ships would find shelter in the bay while sixty-four more vessels waited outside. Certainly I had no visions of Durban's future civic progress that night when I first set eyes on Point Road. Things were lively enough and I was not aware that a band of seafarers were playing out their little comedy on a darkening stage, living for the moment on rich memories and strong beer. Point Road had an aroma of its own; the harbour smells, salt and tar and carbolic; fried fish and coffee and the spicy Eastern odours; poverty and sweat and rickshaw boys; flowers and cane sugar, too, and something indefinable and glamorous that came with the

darkness. When I go back I shall hunt for that last mysterious aroma in Point Road. If I find it I shall meet John Black again and all the others, and I shall be sixteen years old.

CHAPTER TWELVE

PORTS OF THE PORTUGUESE

LOURENCO MARQUES still had its Band Square when I first landed there thirty-five years ago. A nervous governor named Betencourt did away with this seductive *praca* on the ground that the sinister, whispering characters sitting over drinks outside the kiosks were planning a revolution. I thought they were merely eyeing the blondes from the liners but perhaps these malcontents were plotting other adventures as well.

I loved the old Band Square. It was a glowing picture of idlers under the jacaranda trees, marble tables, drinks of every sort and colour from golden brandy to black coffee, green-shuttered windows and the mosaic of a million cobblestones underfoot.

George Pauling the railway contractor and fabulous gourmand boasted that he and two companions breakfasted at a Band Square kiosk on one thousand of the small local oysters and eight bottles of champagne. As I sat there the little Portuguese policemen strutted past wearing swords and sombreros, accompanied by bare-footed native constables with red fezzes and knickerbockers. White sun helmets were prominent in those days. Cool, dignified men appeared in tropical silk suits or white duck, their womenfolk in Parisian creations.

“Boy!” Ali the waiter hurried to one’s table, a black ghost in white raiment. “*Bon dios, senhor.*” He brought a newspaper, glasses of water and toothpicks free of charge; and old customers could also rely on free snacks, fried octopus with olives and

onions, little dishes of potato chips, peanuts and cheese straws. Then one ordered an aperitif. From the Band Square there was a grand view of the shipping, gay house-flags and bright funnels strung out along the quay. Street vendors offered garlic and onions, live chickens slung uncomfortably on poles, little handmade rugs, baskets of fish and fruit, flowers and cheeses. Tourists wandered across the square, peering into strange windows, pestered by bootblacks and sellers of lottery tickets. Some of them paused in an embarrassed way before a small building with two doors, one for Senhoras, the other for Cavalheiros. It was great sport watching them trying to make up their minds. Often they entered the wrong doors and came out with red faces. Always there was life

and interest on the Band Square, and on certain nights there was a band.

Near the Band Square was the Rua Major Araujo, a street that has survived many necessary and unnecessary changes. Major Araujo, a forgotten military hero, little knew the decades of dubious entertainment which were to make this street famous among the world's seamen and others. It has acquired nicknames such as "Whisky Street" and the "Street of Troubles". Generations of sweating policemen have patrolled the line of bars with swing-doors; thousands of reckless drinkers have seen the dawn there and held their aching heads. In my early days there must have been fifteen bars in this one short thoroughfare. You could listen to the Greeks in the Akropolis or other less predictable drinkers in the Chandos, the Fauvette

Parisienne, the Gaiety, Ginette and the rest. A bar licence cost the equivalent of £60 a year in those days, but the licence for each barmaid was £40 extra. A totally unexpected atmosphere was to be found at the Frivolity, better known as Dolly's Bar. I believe she owned the place.

Dolly was a middle-aged, cultured Englishwoman who used neither rouge nor pencil, a quiet woman usually dressed in black. All the leading business men went to her bar and often they drank tea. It was a homely place. Dolly liked her clients to spend a pleasant evening and no one ever drank too much. She was invited everywhere in the British colony of those days, certainly the most remarkable barmaid I ever met. Other bars in the Rua Araújo had weird bands, jangling pianos and feminine company

of a sort. Dolly was one of the personalities of Lourenco Marques. She had one weakness. I was at Bello's Casino, where the roulette and baccarat tables raked in more escudos than some of the banks; and there was Dolly sitting at the baccarat table, apparently careless whether she won or lost. The croupier's rake carried away her stake. Other women bit their fingers but Dolly smiled. She lost most of her profits on the gaming tables yet she went on playing.

One evening I sat on the Band Square with a local newspaperman, an Englishman who owned a publishing business in Lourenco Marques. I was enthralled by his stories of the town he knew so well. There is an Avenida do Duque de Connaught along the bay and when I asked him about this name his answer recalled a great spectacle;

possibly the greatest ever seen in Lourenco Marques. He said the Duke of Connaught had paid an official visit very early this century and the Portuguese had organised a grand *batuque* in his honour. It was a tribal dance on a scale Africa had seldom known before or since. Thousands of Shangaans and Mchopis came into town day after day, until about twenty thousand tribesmen had assembled for the great event. Every man was correctly dressed, with shield and assegai. Football jerseys and other European frills were banned.

When the Duke of Connaught and the white audience arrived at the pavilion on the racecourse almost the only natives visible were those in the massed orchestras of "bantu pianos", xylophones and hornblowers. Round the course were a number of headmen

acting as markers and in the centre there was a single horseman, motionless in the saddle. The dancers were hidden among the trees on the bluff. Suddenly a war-cry rang out from the forest and four leaders raced out with shields and assegais held high. Then came a human cavalcade that made the onlookers gasp; hundreds of men, thousands of men in column of fours rushing into the strong sunlight, plunging down on to the course, turning sharply, moving round the area like an enormous human snake. The endless column began to curl within itself; and still more and more thousands poured out of the trees, rank after rank charging down the face of the bluff, chanting and waving their weapons, until the whole ground was surrounded by the gigantic spiral growing always towards the horseman

in the centre. Louder and louder rose the savage rhythm of the massed bands as the long sinuous line uncoiled and moved faultlessly into long parallel lines facing the Governor General and the Duke of Connaught. And at precisely the same moment the twenty thousand tribesmen stopped dead and gave the royal salute - *Bayete !* The orchestras played the old Portuguese royal national anthem *Hymno do Carta* and finally “God Save the King”. Yes, that was drama and Africa has seldom watched anything more impressive.

I heard many other tales of the old Delagoa Bay. The settlement was no more than a walled camp with a castellated fortress a century ago; drums and bugles and a mutinous black garrison. Wild tribesmen often attacked the place and the Portuguese cut off the

heads of those they killed and stuck them on poles as a warning. Shiploads of hunters sailed out of Durban to shoot buck and wild pig at Delagoa Bay. Adventurers from the Barberton goldfields sometimes visited Delagoa Bay and they would have seized it if President Kruger had given them permission. Indeed there were many clashes between the gold miners and the tiny Portuguese garrison. After a great deal of wild behaviour the Portuguese bought a small coaster, the *Lady Wood*, and fitted her out as a gunboat to maintain law and order. Twice the crew were overpowered and the gunboat looted; once by the Barberton crowd and again by a native chief named Mahash when the *Lady Wood* ran aground on a sandbank.

Delagoa Bay knew the slavers and the ivory traders. Dutch settlers arrived at

different periods and left the fragments of a stone fort near the waterfront. Inyack Island, at the bay entrance, was among the earliest Portuguese settlements in East Africa. You may remember the ancient black-painted brig marked "Pilotes" that lay off Inyack. Austrians backed by the Empress Maria Theresa and led by an English officer, William Bolts, occupied Inyack Island for a time and built a fort. Indian Ocean pirates and the old sailing whalers often called there. Inyack was annexed to Natal a century ago but the British withdrew peacefully after arbitration. Within living memory the island was raided by rebellious natives and Portuguese storekeepers were murdered. Now the tropic isle has become a pleasure resort and also a research station for marine biologists.

Few visitors to the modern Lourenco Marques know the grim background, the bloody pages of the city's past. Residents have created a little Lisbon at this old harbour which has seen great fires and hurricanes, plague and rinderpest and the massacre of Portuguese seamen on the present Polana Beach. In the old days the hospital was always full during the hot season, the "suicide month" of November. One summer day the temperature rose to one hundred and fifteen degrees in the shade and fell to fifty-two when a gale blew up during the afternoon. The old settlement was flooded on many occasions and once it was almost burnt out. Lourenco Marques has survived many vicissitudes.

Lourenco Marques was the navigator who explored Delagoa Bay four

hundred years ago but the bay was known to the Portuguese forty years before that survey. The municipality was set up by royal decree almost a century ago and King Don Luis I ordered the draining of the swamps. Engineers from Holland built the first wharf, known for years as the “Dutch Wharf”. Indians built a white alabaster temple and the Chinese have their own priest and pagoda. It is a city with a drowsy charm of its own, a city with a background, a siesta city.

Sail on to Beira and you are still in the land of the siesta. This town is so recent that in a healthier climate you would expect to find a few aged pioneers telling the wild story. But not here. Beira killed its pioneers. They heard the *ping-ing-ing-zzz* of the invincible mosquito. Cholera, dysentery, malaria and blackwater sent them

to early graves. At one time Beira was regarded as the toughest settlement in Africa, drunken and lawless.

Steamers anchored far out, for the deepwater anchorage close to Beira had not been charted. Passengers were lowered on to tugs in baskets. The earliest arrivals found only a Portuguese fort and a few tents; for Beira was simply a place for landing cargoes. As there was no wharf the lighters were beached and tons of galvanised iron, fencing wire, tinned foods and cases of the essential whisky were carried on shore. Early in the eighteen-nineties a row of one-roomed tin shanties on piles grew up on the sandspit called Beira, the Portuguese word for sand. The sand was so deep that trolley lines had to be laid to carry people and goods up and down the settlement. Every

white resident owned a four-wheeled trolley and hired two Shangaans to push it. The governor had a little State coach with a coat-of-arms and a green awning. Soon the trolley-lines covered twenty-five miles of sand, with turn-tables at crossroads, points and side-tracks and busy junctions. Often the trolleys jumped the eighteen-inch gauge rails, but it was better than walking. I travelled by trolley during my first visit to Beira. I remember the muscular Shangaans and their cry at the end of the run: *Presente ! Presente !* When I revisited Beira in the nineteen-thirties the trolley lines had been torn up, the avenidas had been paved. But out towards the Ponta Gea I came upon a derelict line and a pile of ugly ghosts, the trolleys flung aside for ever. Beira has had the same effect

on many residents and the sight provoked melancholy thoughts.

Heat was a burden in the primitive houses of old Beira. There were insects everywhere and the sandfleas or jiggers burrowed under one's toenails and were extracted by clever natives. Nearly everyone suffered from sore eyes. The garrison was small and feeble. When the Chief Gungunyana's warriors arrived by canoe in battle order to collect taxes from a local potentate the Portuguese were unable to oppose the impis chanting war songs. However, the settlement grew and railway construction drew white adventurers like vultures to a feast. Those men who passed through Beira were hard citizens and they left their mark on the ramshackle seaport. They fought with fists, knives and revolvers and always

they drank. One governor solved the problem by confining the police to barracks when a contingent of British railway workers landed! Serious rioting also occurred when three hundred Arabs and Abyssinians arrived on their way to the Rhodesian mines. They attacked and almost overpowered the garrison but on this occasion the British section sided with the Portuguese and saved the day.

Old Beira was indeed a dangerous place. One British consul named McMaster was stabbed to death by an American cattleman. McMaster was a popular official and there were two thousand people of all races at his funeral. Lions often raided the outskirts of Beira during the early years. Big game wandered over the Ponta Gea at will and roamed the main street. The lover of wild life could also

watch black and white crows fighting the dogs for scraps.

George Pauling once remarked that he wished he had never heard of Beira. When he started the two-foot gauge railway in the early eighteen-nineties the climate was so unhealthy that he lost six of his most experienced white men in one week. Within two years sixty per cent of his men had died. Pauling noted the peculiar fact that there were no teetotalers among the survivors. "They do not stand fever country even as well as excessive drinkers," Pauling declared. He had thousands of natives to feed, and one of his Afrikaner hunters once shot eight buffalo before breakfast.

Men of many nations worked as sub-contractors under Pauling. Some were hiding from the law and the Beira pioneers found strange characters in

their midst. Beira was the only place offering the chance of a spree; and subcontractors earning from £2,000 to £4,000 a year spent freely in the bars. A stern-wheeler named *Kimberley* carried them from Beira to the base construction camp at Fontesvilla, forty miles up the Pungwe River. Captain Dickie was in command, a shrewd and fearsome character who provided food and liquor during the voyage. If his passengers did not patronise the bar Dickie ran the *Kimberley* on to a sandbank and stayed there among the mosquitoes until everyone had been driven to drink. Cecil Rhodes once travelled with Dickie at this period. Rhodes knew the trick and bought Dickie's whole stock of whisky and champagne when the *Kimberley* left Beira. Dickie made the run to Fontesvilla in twelve hours, a record.

Rhodes had intended to travel inland by Cape cart and only when he reached Beira did he discover that there were no roads. He had to abandon his magnificent Cape cart in Beira and there it remained as a showpiece for many years.

When the Pungwe was flooded the water spread out over a vast area and tugmasters had difficulty in finding their way. One tug loaded with railway material left Beira and became lost in the tropical forest. She was left high and dry when the floods subsided and remained there, seven miles from the river, for three years. Then another flood transformed the forest into a lake and the tug steamed on to Fontesvilla with her valuable cargo. Pauling's men had other adventures. Trains and trolleys were halted by lions and men took to the trees. Pauling, a celebrated

drinker, claimed that during a railway journey of forty-eight hours he and his engineers Lawley and Moore consumed three hundred bottles of German beer. Trains were more like tramcars, wide open with seats along both sides. Tiny engines burnt wood, so they stopped every ten miles for water and fuel. When a train from Fontesvilla reached the terminus at Chimoio the passengers transferred to one of the famous Zeederberg or Symington coaches, drawn by mules. It was not until the end of last century that the first train went through from Beira to Salisbury.

Mr. R. C. F. Maugham, who went to Beira as British consul towards the end of last century, found the place terrorised by a gang of desperadoes. Arizona Joe was the leader; but these men never recognised one another in

public, so that it was difficult to identify the gangsters. They wore masks and carried out one robbery after another, forcing white residents to hand over money and valuables. Then they made their victims bring out their whisky. The reign of terror reached a climax when the gangsters murdered two Portuguese policemen. Maugham then decided to take a hand and with the approval of the governor he sent to Salisbury for a party of detectives. They soon dealt with Arizona Joe and his gang. One robber was shot dead and the rest disappeared.

Beira stands only eighteen inches above high tide, so that there was no margin of safety until a concrete sea wall was built to keep the combined forces of the Pungwe and the Busi Rivers at bay. Again and again the sea

swept houses away. Floods breached the first wall and the early disasters were repeated. When a cyclone swept Beira the town was flooded again, the bridge over Chievive Creek looked like a concertina, tugs and lighters were flung ashore, cranes were blown over and the sea wall was smashed.

Mr. P. J. Francis, a shipping agent who lived in Beira before World War I, gave me his impressions of old Beira. When he landed there were only two hundred white people. There were eighty bars but no fresh provision stores. Dinner parties were always arranged for the night when the Rhodesian mail train came in, as it brought fresh meat and vegetables from Umtali. However, there were pioneer hotel keepers who showed great ingenuity in “living off the country”. George Vaghi ran the Hotel

Francais, while an Italian named Martini was host at the Royal. These men served buffalo meat braised with rich gravy so that it tasted like beef. Their guests enjoyed eland, the aromatic flesh of bushbuck, and other venison done in port wine with onions and herbs. Martini often put on a casserole that tasted like tender chicken or hare; and some of his guests were upset when they found they had been eating fruit bat. Now and again the fishermen brought in a dugong with fat as sweet as butter and very palatable meat. Oysters were pickled, stewed, baked or served in fritters, patties and, puddings. Turtle soup and grilled turtle fins often appeared on the Francais and Royal menus. Ground-nut soup was a great favourite. Smoked *bêche de mer*, a sea slug that resembled a charred

sausage, was not popular with all the patrons. Octopus was among the *fritto misto* ingredients. George Vaghi had a bush pie recipe in which it was said that Worcestershire sauce was used to mask the flavour of monkey. Zebra meat was stewed with herbs, olive oil and tomatoes. Pawpaw was served as a vegetable, boiled and mashed. Livers and kidneys of buck were cooked with garlic and red wine. Young warthogs came to the table tasting like pork. Hippo was another dish with a strong pork flavour. Giraffe was more like coarse beef. No one complained about rhino and wildebeest was accepted. Elephant was a great delicacy, for Gregorio Formosinho and other hunters sent in their ivory but seldom did the meat reach the Beira hotels. Martini let everyone know when he was cooking elephant feet in charcoal.

Vaghi roasted elephant heart with considerable skill. I was told that Martini was cheered by everyone dining at his hotel one night when he served a tremendous lion casserole.

Game, pineapple and bananas still find a place on Beira menus but in the homes of the Portuguese the cooking is very different from the efforts of Martini and Vaghi. You can still have shrimp omelettes and prawns a foot long. Dried cod comes all the way from the North Atlantic to be transformed into golden *bacalhau*. Hens' eggs are as small as they were in the early days; if you find five eggs on your breakfast plate then a Beira tradition is still being observed. But instead of hippo there will probably be *Cozido a Portuguesa*, a boiled dinner with rice and potatoes; or smoked pig's back with green peas; or *ovos de*

paraizo, eggs baked with pastry, ham and cheese. Elephant meat has gone for good; you will have to do with *vitella* (veal) marinated with bay leaf, garlic and wine; or gammon stewed with broad beans, onion, wine and olive oil; or pigs' tongues, or the meat balls called *almondegas*. The Portuguese call any roast *rosbif*, so do not be surprised if you are offered *rosbif de porco*. They are great eaters and their fish dishes are especially hearty. I tasted a *Caleirada de peixe* in Beira, a fish stew rather like *bouillabaisse* but without the saffron. They give you a good *sopa de camarao* there, a shrimp soup with a brandy flavour. Sardines are fried in batter. Tunny is simmered skilfully with onions and tomatoes, white wine and olive oil. I also remember the chestnuts boiled with aniseed, the

excellent savoury rice, the *serra* cheese from the milk of mountain ewes. When you come to the sweets I can recommend the quince dish called *Marmelada* and the strange little desserts known as *Sonhos* (dreams) and *Suspiros* (sighs). Old Martini never reached those heights, though there was plenty of Collares in his day, the Portuguese claret, and the strong red wine called Bombarrel.

In the bars of old Beira a character nicknamed Zambesi Jack slaked his thirst. He became famous as Trader Horn, a successful author. Whisky was three shillings a tot, beer three shillings and sixpence a bottle; too expensive for many customers, so they bought *vinho tinto* by the keg and diluted it moderately with water to remove the burning sensation. Those bars were gateways to adventure and

the men who drank there went on to shoot big-game, to plant tea in Nyasaland or prospect the rivers of Mozambique for gold. Beira has been transformed since the lawless days and I have heard it described as a “re-formed harlot”. Yet the past can no more be brushed away than the sand that remains under the flame trees.

I listened to the talk at sundown on the long verandah of the Savoy Hotel. They spoke of the days when an Indian barber came round early every morning to shave male guests in bed; and it made no difference whether they were awake, asleep or drunk; they all got a clean shave. I heard of the man whose friend was eaten by a lion; he shot the lion next day, found a clergyman and arranged a Christian burial for the lion with the man inside. They told me about a Savoy Hotel

manager named Ellis, a generous man who was always calling out: “Drinks are on the house.” Some people took advantage of his good nature and signed his name on their bar chits. Mrs. Ellis looked after the accounts and Ellis was often in trouble with his wife. I heard tales of the rakish dhaws in the harbour and the little coasters reeking of copra and overrun with rats and cockroaches. Those people on the verandah spoke in hushed voices of treasure, on the caravan route to Sofala and gold in unmapped gullies. They discussed many strange topics with rich anecdote and emphatic ring of glasses as the sun went down.

No longer are there shots in the night to disturb law-abiding Beira. Most of the tin shacks and old iron balconies have disappeared. I visited the rusty skeleton of a three-masted iron sailing

ship in the jungle round the Makuti lighthouse, thinking it was a ghost of old Beira; but no, it was just a useless hulk that had been dragged in there to bind the sand. The war against sand goes on all the time. Yet modern Beira has fine villas with courtyards and slatted awnings and lovely gardens. It has a Pavilhao Oceana on the beach and streets and hotels the old hands would not recognise: The Rua Major Serpe, the Rua Alvarez Cabral, the Hotel Embaixador and the Hotel Grande. But the black January storms still sweep across the harbour with heavy rain. Summer is still a Turkish bath, winter is still perfect. Beira, almost an island, still looks out on its desolate mangrove swamps, its yellow sand and the unchanging brown water of the Pungwe estuary.

Mozambique spreads for more than sixteen hundred miles along the East African coast. It is the name of a huge territory and also of a tiny coral island five hundred miles beyond Beira. Mozambique is one more of those tropical African outposts filled with the elusive quality called atmosphere; one more of those towns built on a grim foundation of human skeletons.

This is the oldest white settlement in Africa south of the equator. Vasco da Gama called there at the end of the fifteenth century. There his weary sailors mutinied after a severe buffeting; but they sailed on to India. Nine years later the Portuguese started building a fort, church and hospital on the tiny green island three miles from the coast. Parts of the town have remained unchanged since the early sixteenth century. When you gaze on

the ancient barred and bolted doors and windows, the rusting cannon on frowning parapets, the narrow streets wide enough only for rickshaws then you are back in the East Africa of the explorers.

Mozambique Island, three miles long and five hundred yards wide has seen the flag of Portugal raised every day for nearly five centuries. If the Dutch attack had been successful the Dutch would have set up their refreshment station there instead of Table Bay; but they were beaten off. The Portuguese settled on this island because they needed a secure harbour of refuge for ships making the long *Carreira da India*, the round trip from Lisbon to Goa and back. Ships which failed to catch the favourable south-west monsoon when homeward bound spent the winter in Mozambique

harbour. They anchored there outward bound with their hundreds of soldiers and specie, their heavy casks of wine and water; and they returned with spices and silks. But always there were outbreaks of malaria and scurvy, and the island became the graveyard of thousands of Portuguese soldiers and sailors. I think the Dutch East India Company showed great wisdom when they chose Table Bay. But the Dutch might have made better colonists than the Portuguese. I have seen a priest's note on early Mozambique and it is a revealing description: "Mozambique is not so repulsive as it is painted but the Portuguese with their worldly desires and gluttony fill the burial places. The provisions are ordinarily sufficient for there are luscious oranges and lemons, good sucking-pigs, good cows, figs, and I even saw pomegranates there.

Wheat and rice come from Sena on the mainland and both are excellent. Yet few places in the tropics have claimed so many lives.”

Certainly the Portuguese showed tremendous drive when they built the great fort they called San Sebastian. I stood one sweltering afternoon on the ramparts of the grey old castle dreaming of the energy and courage of the men who founded this pioneer outpost. They brought the dressed stone all the way from Lisbon in caravels. Ship after ship came in, decade after decade; and only after forty years was San Sebastian completed. The town that grew under the seventy-foot walls of the castle was like a fragment of old Portugal; low, tiled houses painted pink and yellow, green and white, low houses with grilles and flat roofs and

castellated parapets. Only the huts thatched with palm leaves belonged to Africa. I remember the stone landing steps, historic masonry trodden by generations of conquistadors and slaves and labourers burdened with gold and ivory.

San Sebastian was held by the Portuguese against attack after attack by the Arabs. The riches of India and Africa passed these grey battlements. The courtyard rang with the cries of adventure and the echoes have hardly died away. I could almost hear the survivors of the lost Portuguese treasure ships coming through the gateway with their tales of shipwreck and hardship on the unfriendly coast. Some of those treasure ships were never located. British treasure hunters followed a legend of an old Portuguese wreck near Mozambique and

found the sunken hull. Fragments and equipment brought to the surface provided evidence that she belonged to the period when Portugal was growing rich on gold and jewels. Eagerly the divers blasted their way through the ancient timbers and reached the cargo. It was stone, great blocks of dressed stone for the walls of San Sebastian.

Mozambique Island lies in the path of those furious cyclones that arise in the Southern Indian Ocean and come roaring up the channel towards the end of the year. Before the days of radio the people of Mozambique said they could feel a cyclone approaching long before the whiplash struck them. The sky might be blue, the sea calm; but there was an uneasy atmosphere of suspense in the town. It might be a queer red sunset that warned them, or a yellow haze; and sometimes there

was a halo round the moon. Then the low, swift clouds appeared. The whole world of nature seemed to be on the move, the seabirds and even the fish. They closed their shutters in Mozambique and barred their doors. Market women gathered up their manioc and sugar cane and cashew nuts and departed. Ships put down their heaviest anchors. In the governor's palace, houses and hovels, the people cowered and waited for the blow.

It came with a menacing roar. The noon sun was blotted out, seas crashed on the castle walls, the rain and wind thundered on the old walls of Mozambique. Men caught outside had to crawl to safety; they could not breathe when they faced the screaming cyclone. There might be a deceptive lull that lasted for hours, a dangerous

sign. That meant the island was in the centre of the cyclone. When the wind returned from the opposite direction it blew harder than before. Then it would move away slowly over the mainland and allow the people of the island to survey the devastation and bury the dead. One cyclone eighty years ago destroyed all the shipping in the bay, damaged the lighthouse, flattened many houses. Only San Sebastian defied the violence. There it stands, the great stone castle built by the men who raised the veil of mystery that had rested over the whole of Southern Africa for so long.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN HAVEN OF PEACE

WHEN I visited Dar es Salaam in the nineteen-twenties there was a great and regrettable slaughter of elephants going on in the hinterland. It was the heyday of the hunter. Pianos still had ivory keys and no one dreamt of plastic substitutes. Tanganyika offered free licences so that farmers would not be troubled by elephants. Tusks were

coming into Dar es Salaam by the hundred.

My guide to the world of tusks was a most experienced ivory buyer, Mr. E. D. Moore, known on the coast as “Tusker” Moore because of his occupation. Moore took me into a ratproof godown, a store where the tusks were piled up ready for shipment. “Got to keep the rats out - they gnaw into soft tusks to get at the oil,” said Moore. He pointed out the large curved tusks of the bull elephants; the shorter, round cow tusks, highly prized by makers of billiard balls; the little “scrivelloes” used for bangles; hard translucent ivory and soft opaque ivory; the brown *gendi* tusks from beyond the Lakes; white ivory and tusks which had taken on the colour of blood from the smoke in native huts.

“Africans never valued ivory until the white man came,” Moore told me. “They propped up their huts with tusks and they fenced graves and cattle pens with tusks. Stanley saw an ivory temple during his travels. They killed elephants for the meat and often left the tusks in the bush. So there was a time when tusks were two a penny and the only problem was sending them down to the coast. Slaves solved the problem. Columns of slaves staggered along under the great weight of ivory.”

Stanley denounced the trade in these famous words: “Every tusk in the possession of an Arab trader has been steeped and dyed in blood. Every pound weight of ivory has cost the life of a man, woman or child. Huts have been burned, villages destroyed, the rich heart of Africa has been laid waste.” Now the trade had become

respectable, apart from the killing of all these enormous animals for the sake of their lovely teeth.

Moore said that a lot of the ivory coming into Dar es Salaam consisted of old tusks found in swamps and rivers and the remote bush. Some was cracked and perished, others were still in fine condition. But the huge sweeping tusks handled by dealers last century had become rare. Then, a tusk weighing eighty pounds was common; the average had gone down to fifty or less. “And you have to make sure that the simple African has not poured molten lead into the ivory to increase the weight,” remarked Moore with a smile. He loved ivory for its own sake and had a grand collection of ivory necklaces, bracelets, armlets, horns and idols. Moore admired the grain, the resilience, the exquisite feel, the

true beauty of ivory. I cannot imagine him gazing with reverence on a knife with a plastic handle.

I have another memory of Dar es Salaam long ago. At the market I saw a rich array of tropical fish and other foods which I tasted later; an experience which always ranks in my mind as an adventure. On the stalls there were oysters and huge clams from Oyster Bay, kingfish and red mullet, strange fruits and vegetables I had never eaten before. If the oysters lacked the flavour of Whitstables they made up for it in size and the fact that they grew on trees, the roots of the mangrove trees in the swamps. I enjoyed oysters in white sauce, browned under the grill with cheese and served on spinach. Clams appeared in a chowder of pork, onions and tomatoes. Crabs were chopped up

and baked with curry powder. The local crawfish lacked the flavour of the Cape species from ice-cold seas but they made a pleasant dish when served as lobster cutlets. Prawns were fried and presented on anchovy toast. Kingfish or wahoo, regarded as the aristocrat of those waters, came to the table in grilled steaks with egg sauce. There were smoked sardines from Zanzibar and another cured fish that might almost have masqueraded as a kipper. Dolphins, the fish not the mammals, are known in Dar es Salaam as faloosi; they are diced and marinaded in fresh limes and after further treatment with tomatoes, green peppers and Worcestershire sauce they go into a memorable fish cocktail.

Swahili cooks make clever use of a flavouring extract from freshly-grated coconut known as tui ya nazi. They

also cook some fish dishes in milk of coconut with bay leaves and cloves. Dar es Salaam is one of those places where meat and poultry have to be disguised as much as possible. Curries are usually good. I liked the curried brinjals and also the thin slices of brinjal baked in the oven, crisp and brown. (Fried brinjal, they told me, absorbs too much fat). Breadfruit was eaten boiled with sauce, like vegetable marrow. Sweet potatoes were served as a sweet, boiled and sprinkled with grated coconut. I also saw, for the first time in my life, a pawpaw tart. After such menus I was ready to admire the beauty of Dar es Salaam bay.

Dar es Salaam is one of the few sheltered harbours along the East African coast. It would be perfect but for the narrow entrance which has caused nightmares among shipmasters;

the dreaded channel with its sharp bends, reefs and currents known only to the local pilots, But once you are inside the invisible harbour suddenly becomes a gorgeous circular land-locked bay surrounded by coconut palms, mangroves, beaches with green turf running down to the sand, cliffs and spires and avenues of crimson flamboyants.

Arab dhows still come in from the Persian Gulf, India and Somaliland, bringing dates and dried fish, rugs and cloth. The cries of the dhow sailors, their drums and the high-pitched notes of their zomaris are among the romantic sounds of the “haven of peace”. Fishermen use double outrigger canoes, each hull shaped from a single tree trunk. Small boats loaded with ebony elephants, brassware and silks go out to meet the

liners. Canoes with eyes in their prows move off to the reefs and islands. On the reefs at low tide men hunt the green turban shells with their valuable mother-o'-pearl. Here, too, in caves and recesses are cowries, violet and moon shells. Women in black kangas wade along the shores of the bay with close-meshed nets catching tiny fish like whitebait. I was told they were all widows. Only a Swahili widow has the privilege of harvesting these silvery fish, the tasty little fish that makes excellent curries.

Dar es Salaam is one of East Africa's new towns. True, there are ancient mosques and tombs in the neighbourhood; the ships of King Solomon may have entered the lovely harbour; junks from China anchored there and dhows have sailed in from India, and Persia for centuries. Yet the present Dar es

Salaam site was a tiny fishing village called Mzizima in the middle of last century. Mzizima means "the healthy town". Sultan Majid of Zanzibar planned a settlement there about a century ago. The Sultan was a slave trader and British naval seamen with guns and cutlasses were interfering cruelly with his business; so he decided to build a quiet headquarters on the mainland. In a mood of wishful thinking he called the place Dar es Salaam, "haven of peace" and sent thousands of slaves to start the great work.

A priest named Father Hoerner visited Dar es Salaam at this period on board the sultan's yacht. She was the former *Shenandoah*, the Confederate raider, renamed *El Majidi*, a fast ship of one thousand tons, with steam and sail. Father Hoerner was accompanied by a guard of honour. He saw the slaves

building a palace and a few other buildings which were still in use during World War I; the slaves were also sinking the deep wells which served Dar es Salaam for half a century. Herds of hippo swam round *El Majidi* and hundreds of monkeys gibbered in the trees.

Then came the Germans, in the eighteen-eighties. Sultan Majid was dead and most of his buildings were in ruins and infested with snakes and bats. The palace became a German prison with convicts lying on slabs of marble: Customs and police made use of other Arab relics. On the northern promontory German missionaries put up a double-storied building designed for the steamy climate with jalousies and a top floor open to the winds but sheltered by a roof; a famous place which was pointed out to me as the

first European building in the town. (A secret Hitler “altar” was discovered there during World War II). German officers fortified various ruins, for the town was attacked by Arab raiders. The first large garrison at Dar es Salaam included Zulu warriors and Sudanese mercenaries. German officials built thick-walled government structures and pretty houses of coral rock with red tiles or slate roofs. Steel frames were brought from Germany for the upper storeys of certain large buildings. In spite of deep, shady balconies and tropical shutters, the atmosphere of Dar es Salaam was heavily Teutonic. Before the century ended the town had a Lutheran church with a spire that is still prominent on the skyline. A fine German railway station was followed by a Kaiserhof Hotel, later the New Africa. The

palace of the German governor on the ocean front was more gorgeous than the sultan's crumbling palace. There was an impressive *Kommandantur* building, a *Casino* or mess for army officers, an excellent hospital, and a beer garden on the seafront where the drinkers could listen to the monsoon rustling the casuarinas. Broad, paved streets were lined with ornamental trees. A legacy of those days which has puzzled many people, however, is the peculiar layout. Streets in the downtown business area converge on traffic circles and there is great congestion. Of course the Germans could not have foreseen the growth of motor transport. White people, including the governor, used rickshaws. Zebras were tamed for riding and driving; and a German sergeant-major caused a panic in leisurely Dar es Salaam when he

tore through the streets with a zebra "four in hand" vehicle. Horses were rarely seen in the early years of the century. The town plan suited ox-wagons, sent up from the Cape as an experiment; or the long columns of porters who set out into the hinterland with their head-loads.

I mentioned the beer garden which was the social hub of Dar es Salaam early this century. Russian battleships, part of an armada which had called previously at Cape Town entered Dar es Salaam on the way to fight the Japanese. The Russians bought up all the liquor in the German stores and left Dar es Salaam in a thirsty state until the next *Deutsche Ost Afrika* liner arrived. Officials who had become used to Scotch whisky could not be consoled with *pombe* and other native brews.

Strange cargoes passed through the Dar es Salaam of German colonial days. Ivory and rhino horn were everyday commodities; but once there came armies of carriers bearing thousands of loads of fossil material. East Africa was the home of dinosaurs. A monster fossil reptile was found deep in the interior and sent at enormous cost to a museum in Germany.

Dar es Salaam would have seen a colonial exhibition in 1914, but war intervened. The great steel frame which would have housed the show was turned into a native market hall. The town lost its most imposing building in 1914, for H.M.S. Goliath turned her twelve-inch guns on the governor's palace and destroyed it. Soon afterwards the Germans attempted to block the narrow harbour entrance by sinking the steamer *Konig*

and a floating dock in the fairway. Dynamite was placed in the bottom of the *Konig* and the fuse was lighted; but there was no explosion. The officer in charge of the task was court-martialled but acquitted when he proved that the dynamite was fifteen years old and useless. So the channel was never blocked. Dar es Salaam surrendered easily when a British invading force appeared. General von Lettow Vorbeck, the tough German military commander, was up-country at the time and was disgusted when he heard the news. "For a soldier it was not very inspiring to find that here, under the very eyes of a thousand good troops, an agreement had been reached which forbade us to take any hostile action at Dar es Salaam," wrote Von Lettow. "There was no warlike spirit. The people at Dar es Salaam

had no stomach for fighting.” Scuttled vessels at Dar es Salaam gave the salvage men a great deal of work after the war ended.

Many elderly South Africans remember Dar es Salaam as a huge military base camp during the latter part of World War I. Thousands of South African horses and mules were landed there. At one time five thousand white soldiers were living under canvas. One of those soldiers told me that lions roamed the streets of Dar es Salaam in those days and for long afterwards. A bank clerk shot a lion in the street some years after the war. Hippos leave the creeks occasionally and invade the native quarter. Dar es Salaam is still close to the jungle.

Germany failed to leave on Dar es Salaam the deep impression that you

find all over South West Africa to this day. Nearly all the Germans were deported from Tanganyika after World War I. The language and the customs died out rapidly and only the strong buildings stood as reminders of such characters as Karl Peters, Von Wissmann the explorer, Governor Schnee and the formidable Von Lettow. Even the Teutonic buildings have been surrounded and overshadowed now and German names and dates on the gargantuan baobab trees in Dar es Salaam are becoming faint with age. Von Wissmann’s statue no longer stands in a seafront palm grove; now there is a bronze monument in honour of the African soldiers who fell in the wars. The last issue of the *Deutsch Ost Afrikanische Zeitung* was sold more than half a century ago. With the Germans went most of the uniforms –

and the lash as the remedy for every breach of discipline. Sir Horace Byatt, first British governor, put up an expensive and ornate government house of Moorish design on the foundations of Dr. Schnee's shattered palace. Under the sausage trees, along Acacia Avenue's blazing mass of colour, there grew up a new way of life.

I looked for the old Dar es Salaam when I returned after many years. Dwarf parrots, the so-called lovebirds, were still making their domed nests in roofs and baobabs and screeching happily. (One of the less romantic sounds of the town). Often I heard the more interesting beat of the long drums and the whistles of ngoma parties. I was offered the same wooden birds and Masai warrior statuettes in the shops of Acacia Avenue; but the

eager Asiatic salesmen told me sadly that the skins of leopards, black and white colobus monkeys, blue monkeys and other animals were now on the protected list. Not that I wanted such trophies or hippo teeth. I felt the heat more, and someone informed me that government officials were granted eight months' leave after thirty months service. Then a whiff of copra reached me, and a breath from the mangrove swamps, and I remembered Moore and the ivory and the fans playing on departed faces. And I walked slowly to the hotel of my choice in search of a meal such as those that had lingered in my memory through the decades. Perhaps I was lucky that day, for there were oysters on the menu with kingfish to follow. A coffee seller with brass pots sauntered past the open window sounding his little gong and I

was back in the Dar es Salaam of my youth.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

RUM HARBOUR

BEFORE I leave these hot Indian Ocean harbours there is one more port of call, an island of fond memories. It is Mauritius, a mountainous volcanic mass about the size of the Cape Peninsula; and when I was there in the middle nineteen-twenties the sweltering capital Port Louis seemed to belong to another century. Recent visitors have formed the same impression. Great aircraft come in to land at La Plaisance on the southern coast but the fine old mansions they pass over still belong to the reigns of Louis XV and Louis XVI.

I shall never go back. Revolution has come to Mauritius, almost as menacing as the French Revolution. The quaint railway I loved has been

torn up and sold. I liked Port Louis as I first saw it, when I first savoured its fragrance from the open promenade deck of the old six-thousand ton intermediate Gaika. The islanders looked on that late Victorian liner as a *Mauretania* or *Queen Mary*; as a luxurious link with the outside world. And indeed the world was far away from drowsy Mauritius for it was a run of six days eastwards from Durban. Now the days have become flying hours. I think the air is the wrong approach to this isle of Dutch ruins and French chateaux, of *Paul et Virginie*, an isle which once possessed the strangest fauna on the face of the earth.

On board the Gailca there was a French Mauritian named Bertrand, a polished and pleasant young man who was returning after studying

history at Oxford and the Sorbonne. He was a patriotic and enthusiastic Mauritian, anxious to attract visitors to his remote home; and he saw in me a means to this end. Probably he overrated my influence. Nevertheless he showed me Port Louis and his lovely island with an enthusiasm which none of the British exiles there displayed.

First of all Bertrand took me round Port Louis, a town which had known many dreadful episodes and which had been abandoned by well-to-do residents after a malaria epidemic last century. "This island was a sanatorium until the malaria came", Bertrand recalled. "It has seen many devastating cyclones, fires and smallpox, cholera and bubonic plague; but the malaria frightened the wits out of everyone. One third of the people in Port Louis

died. Doctors had only vague ideas of treating it and there was no quinine. Imagine nearly twenty thousand deaths round this harbour alone! So those who could afford it cleared out up the mountain to Vacoas and Curepipe. Some of them took their houses with them, fine wooden mansions that could be taken apart and set up elsewhere."

Here and there in Port Louis old-fashioned colonial timbered houses have survived, eighteenth and nineteenth century homes of painted wood and wide verandahs. You find them behind the high walls of lush, tropical gardens in Pope Hennessy and Rempart streets. Some have decayed, others have been turned into offices and warehouses; but they remind us of the long years before steam, before the Suez Canal opening, when prosperous

Port Louis looked out over a harbour where two hundred sailing ships lay at anchor.

Bertrand noticed that I was sniffing the air, trying to fix the aroma of Port Louis. “It is sugar and molasses and rum”, he declared. “These godowns hold the greatest stocks of sugar in the world. Keep clear of the wasps and bees that come here for the sweetness. Of course you can smell cloves and nutmeg and spices, too, and we also grow tea. But we have a one-crop economy, more’s the pity, and when the sugar crop fails or the price slumps then Mauritius goes phut. Here we have Hindus, far too many Hindus, Moslems and Creoles, Chinese and white people, all depending on sugar. There is no room for other crops. We bring in rice and flour, meat and even fish. But we have too many people -

too many Hindus. I wonder what will happen to us?”

When I went to the markets of Port Louis with Bertrand there seemed to be an abundance of island food. Bananas were there in great variety, from the tiny, tasty *gingelis* to red plantains twelve inches long. Stalls were covered with bread fruit like huge green sponges. I saw pawpaws and limes, mangoes and the fresh red litchis the Chinese love. “Our best fruit is the pineapple”, Bertrand remarked. “But over there you see a rare fruit, the mabolo, that some call the ‘celestial fruit’. It has a dreadful odour, like the durian, but the flavour is delicious.”

I thought the dominant odour of the market was fried pork (for the Chinese customers) with curry and rice (for the Indians) as a close rival.

Bertrand led me through a crowd surrounding a curry stall and we became spectators at a strange eating contest between a fat Chinese with chopsticks and a thin Indian coolie. Each man had before him a mound of curry and rice, the portions having been weighed. They started together, chopsticks versus fingers, and the Chinese won amid great excitement. "The prize was one rupee but of course both men had a free meal", explained Bertrand.

All round me I heard a language that sounded like French, but with strange differences. "The island *patois*", said Bertrand with a smile. "Like pidgin English, this is a simplified French mixed with African and Malagasy words. We call it Creole. By the way, there was a time when a Creole was a white person born in

Mauritius, but now it has come to mean a member of the dark mixed race that has grown up on the island. Creole came into being when the early planters talked to their slaves in a sort of infantile French and the slaves responded with their own accents. It is a hideous yet amusing corruption and it works very well."

Bertrand gave me some examples. *Le chien* (dog) becomes *dicien* in Creole, while *un cheval* (horse) is replaced by *un seval*. They always say *moi* (me) instead of *je* (I). Some of the origins of Creole words have been lost; words like *tiggin* meaning "a little". If you want very little you say *tiggin tiggin*. "Zed" sounds are common and many words resembling sounds have found places in the *patois*. To tickle is *fire guidiguidi*. A lazy effeminate person is *gnangnan* while *éne catacata*

is a flirt. A tall, awkward man is *balalame*. Creole has a strain of peculiar humour, such as the island name for a hearse, *caléche granpapa* (old man's coach). Some of the cradle songs and proverbs are witty. Creole has such a strong appeal that Indians born in Mauritius soon drop the languages of their parents. French, Chinese and Indians converse in Creole but few Mauritians have attempted to write the language. Creole is a spoken *patois* and it seems likely to grow with the years within the island of its birth. Reunion, the other French speaking island only a hundred miles away, has its own *patois*, entirely different from the Creole of Mauritius.

In the Port Louis market I set eyes on the *coco-de-mer* for the first time in my life and Bertrand laughed as he

saw my look of astonishment. Do you know this absurd fruit? It is sold more as a curio than anything else nowadays, but when the first of these double-coconuts washed up on the coast of India centuries ago it was mysterious flotsam. Apart from the almost incredible shape (like the lower parts of a woman) there was the riddle of origin. Wise old men suggested that the coconuts must have grown on the bed of the sea, for no one had seen a palm bearing this fruit on shore. So the name *coco-de-mer* arose. When the nut was opened an almost tasteless flesh and jelly were revealed. Here, said the wise men, was a cure for many diseases. Indian princes heard of the discovery and shrewd physicians advised them that the nuts held restorative powers hitherto unknown among aphrodisiacs. Beachcombers

roamed the Malabar coast and received thousands of rupees for each nut they found. Only when the French landed on the Seychelles in the middle of the eighteenth century and saw *coco-de-mer* palms growing on two islands was the mystery solved. Of course the price slumped in spite of the action of an ingenious French nobleman who sent a large cargo of the nuts to India and then set fire to the coconut groves. The *coco-de-mer* was not exterminated though belief in its magical properties has almost died out. The nuts are still sold to eager tourists. Island people saw the nuts in two and use them as dishes and plates. Brooms and baskets are made from the ribs of the leaves, mattresses and pillows are stuffed with the down and hats are woven from the young leaves. But the days

when oriental potentates ornamented *coco-de-mer* cups with gold and precious stones are over and the beautiful legend has been exploded.

A memorable place, the Port Louis market. You can smell French bread there and spices, coffee and the cigars they roll on the island. They were selling birds in cages while I was there, scarlet cardinals and love birds and yellow canaries at a rupee a pair. Indians burn frankincense to bring them luck and Chinese shopkeepers let off firecrackers at a drop of a pigtail. One afternoon when the boats and long *pirogues* came in I walked with Bertrand round the fish market. I saw live fish in tanks and dazzling fish on slabs like birds of brilliant plumage. You could buy a slice of man-eating shark or a dozen oysters; a crab, a catfish or an eel.

Bertrand knew all the island fish; the beaked parrot fish, the speckled *cordonnier* (shoemaker) that lives among the rocks and is caught in basket traps. Here, too, was the unicorn fish with its horn. I saw the huge *carangue*, like tunny, and the grey mullet that are netted in thousands in the coral lagoons. They had an enormous sunfish in the market that day; and Bertrand said the tail would cut a man like a razor. "I like to eat the fins", he added. "But the finest fish in the market is the *poule-d'eau*, the fowl of the water, a green fish shaped like a turbot and not at all common. Sometimes there is turtle flesh to be had on Fridays - the turtles are brought here alive from the outlying islands, Cargados Carajos and others."

Mauritius has trout called *chite* in the mountain streams but the most interesting freshwater fish is the *gourami*. This is a broad, dark grey fish bred in the lake at Pamplemousses. The *gourami* is so tame that it will come to the side and eat breadcrumbs almost out of your hand. Cook it soon after capture and you have a most delicate fish. French families serve it with a creamy *béchamel* sauce.

Bertrand informed me that the best way to see Mauritius was by railway. Of course there were motor-cars in those days but Bertrand pointed out that the brakes often failed on the steep mountain roads. Moreover, the slow pace of the island railway would give me time to appreciate the scenery, the exquisite and romantic panoramas of this island at the end of the world.

“On each branch line it is different”, declared Bertrand the enthusiast. “You will see ravines and waterfalls, dark green canefields and forests with the Javanese deer the Dutch brought here before they settled at the Cape. Every mountain in Mauritius has its own personality, every beach has its blue lagoon.”

So I went with Bertrand to the central railway station close to the waterfront. It was soon after breakfast and train after train was bringing the workers down from the mountains to their shops and offices. Artisans and clerks arrived first, many in black suits, and every man jack carrying his lunch basket. Executives, high government officials, professional men came later; and they wore in those uncomfortable and hidebound days white sun helmets and suits of white duck. The bush shirt

had not yet been designed, shorts would have been unthinkable; yet Port Louis had a suffocating climate and the punkahs gave little relief. Each manager or senior official was met at the station by a *peon*, a uniformed messenger who carried such light impedimenta as brief cases and umbrellas. It was the custom. Mauritius was then a suburbia with nearly everyone travelling by train. A man had his favourite and traditional seat in a compartment where he met the same people every day. But for the tropical clothes, the palms, the flamboyants and banyans - and the heat - they might have been travelling from Richmond or Surbiton to their destination in the City.

However, the rolling-stock on this government railway would have raised every eyebrow at Charing Cross or

Waterloo. Many of the small, squarely-built coaches were double-deckers; first-class passengers rode in cushioned comfort down below with heavily-shuttered windows; third (or possibly fourth) class travellers were up on the roof in glorified hen-coops. Owing to the gradients the steam locomotives were powerful and there were never more than ten coaches on a train. Engines and coaches bore the proud coat-of-arms of Mauritius, “star and key of the Indian Ocean”. The governor had his own special coach, of course, an ornate teak lounge on wheels such as I would like to own myself. Some of the rolling-stock went right back to 1864, the year of the railway opening.

I studied the time-tables and noted the names. Mauritius had about one hundred miles of railway lines and

clearly this was the steel road to romance. One morning I steamed out of Port Louis bound for Mahebourg, the old and decayed port on the far side of the island. Stations were a mile, seldom more than two miles apart. And the names! Bell Village was followed by Pailles and Richelieu, Petite Riviere, Beau Bassin and Cascade Road. I went on through Rose Hill and Quatre Bornes to Phoenix and Vacoas, Floreal and Curepipe. By this time I had covered sixteen miles and the journey had lasted a full hour. The heavy gradient of one in twenty-six and the many stops explained the schedule. The train had risen eighteen-hundred feet to this residential suburb with the curious name. Bertrand said that in the days when a *diligence* or stage-coach crossed the island the drivers always rested the horses

outside the inn at this spot in the virgin forest and took out their pipes; so *curer la pipe* became Curepipe. It is a suburb of clipped bamboo hedges ten feet high, morning glory flowers, a market and a mosque, tea plantations, and the Trou-aux-Cerfs, the perfect volcanic crater. From the rim of the crater there is a panoramic view of the mountains of northern Mauritius, including the peaks called *Les Trois Mamelles*. Yes, the names never disappoint you. The line goes on to Rose Belle, Mare d'Albert and Mahebourg in the Grand Port where Simon van der Stel was born.

Mauritius has many links with the Cape. It became a dependency of the Cape under the Dutch East India Company in the seventeenth century, the Dutch having occupied the island with the idea of keeping other nations away

from a useful base. At that period ebony and ambergris were the only exports. Hubert Hugo, a former pirate, was appointed commander of Mauritius in 1671. Early in the eighteenth century, however, the Dutch closed down the settlement and the Zaaïman, Ramond and De Vries families were transferred to the Cape. Schooners owned by Cape Town firms carried dried snoek to Mauritius for many years last century, returning with cargoes of sugar.

I visited the Dutch cemetery there and thought of the dodo, the ungainly extinct bird that was once plentiful. You may still find a skeleton and that would have something more than a scientific value.

Another railway run along the level northern line carried me past Albion Dock (how few English names there

are) and Roche Bois to Terre Rouge and Pamplémousses. I could have gone on to Poudre d'Or to seek the gold dust buried there by a forgotten pirate but I chose to linger in the botanical gardens of Pamplémousses. Until the cyclone towards the end of last century, botanists ranked these gardens as third in the world. The cyclone rushed in at one hundred and twenty miles an hour, revolving like an express train on a wicked curve. Rare and majestic trees planted by the French in the eighteenth century were slammed flat. Mauritius lost about a quarter of a million trees in that disaster and more than a thousand people were killed.

Bertrand accompanied me by rail to Moka one day. French planters called it Moka because they tried to grow coffee there long ago. From there we

walked to the private railway station on Le Reduit, residence of the governor. Bertrand described the scene when there was a ball or some other large gathering at government house. Train after train would come up through the cane fields and over the ravines to Le Reduit station. They would find the platform decorated with paper lanterns; then they would take their seats in a cavalcade of horse-drawn carriages and drive between the stone gate-posts with crowns, along a tropical avenue, under the huge camphor trees and through the gardens designed more than two centuries ago by the Frenchman who laid out the grounds at Versailles. Few official residences in the world can compare with the Le Reduit site. It stands on a dramatic promontory between two ravines

overlooking the ocean, this old, double storeyed French chateau. Verandahs paved with black and white marble run the full length of the building with its two hundred and forty doors and windows. Le Reduit means “the redoubt” and it was first built to serve as a stronghold during a possible invasion. The first wooden building was destroyed by white ants and so a new stone Le Reduit arose. This second residence was shattered during a cyclone a century ago, the roof was torn off the east wing and Governor Sir Henry Barkly and his wife had narrow escapes. A later governor notorious for his extravagance rebuilt Le Reduit and added an enormous ballroom. I walked round the place with Bertrand, for he was accepted in every circle in Mauritius, from government house to the

Chinese quarter. It was a lovely old mansion, this secluded place among the ferns and royal palms and mango trees, guarded by ditches and gun emplacements. The front doors opened straight into the ballroom and we saw ourselves in dozens of long wall mirrors with gilt frames. I could easily imagine the lavish banquets given by the bygone governors of Mauritius, with “God Save the Queen” long after midnight.

“Of course the place is haunted”, narrated Bertrand. “They say that Labourdonnais, the admiral who became governor of Mauritius, rides again. with his staff - only he and his men are skeletons in uniform and even the horses are skeletons. *Formidable!* However, some young British officers sat up on a night of the full moon many years ago, .

champagne on the table, swords beside them, waiting for the strange noise of the ghostly horsemen that is heard sometimes on such nights. Sure enough they heard hooves on the gravel and the officers rose with drawn swords and turned out the guard. And there in the terraced gardens among the roses they found a herd of wild deer from the mountains. That is the way most ghost stories end. Not long ago there was a wailing at night - monkeys on the lawn! But I can tell you of something more dangerous than a ghost at Le Reduit. They found a boa constrictor here, fourteen feet long, strong enough to kill a stag. It had come from a wrecked ship and it lived in the woods for years until it visited Le Reduit. Here they shot it."

As we travelled under the mountain ranges Bertrand pointed out of the train window to one peak after another and told me stories and legends. I remember the drama of Pieter Both, the mountain over Port Louis that always seems to menace the town. Named after a Dutch admiral, this queer mountain rises to two thousand six hundred feet above the harbour. It has on the summit a great pearshaped boulder. The summit can only be approached by a narrow ridge with a sheer drop of one thousand feet into the trees. For many years it seemed that the overhanging boulder would never be conquered by man. According to legend, said Bertrand, a party of French climbers reached the top during the eighteenth century; but they could not get down and they left their bones on the boulder. However, an

expedition organised by a Captain Lloyd and other British Army officers, accompanied by sepoy and baggage coolies, tackled Pieter Both in the eighteenthirties. They took scaling ladders, ropes, crowbars, ample provisions and camp equipment. When they came to a flat area just beneath the obelisk Captain Lloyd tried to shoot an arrow with a line attached over the boulder. He failed but when he hurled a stone fastened to a line he succeeded. A rope was then hauled over the boulder, a rope ladder followed and the climbers were able to defeat the overhang. They made a hole in the rock, raised a flagpole, hoisted the Union Jack and sent up a rocket. Down in the harbour H.M.S. *Undaunted* fired a salute. The climbers decided to spend the night on the boulder and their porters sent up great

coats, blankets and finally a hot meal prepared on the platform below. They lit a fire and one of them recorded: "The prospect beneath us as we lay enjoying our brandy and cigars was magnificent. The sky was clear and the moon shone brightly, lighting up the scene. It was a scene the romantic mind would dwell on with ecstasy." One officer who was known to walk in his sleep was lashed to another member of the party. They were all cold and stiff when dawn came and they were glad to return. Pieter Both has often been climbed since then. The great boulder is still poised on the summit, weighing several tons and resembling Queen Victoria in her robes. They used to say that the British would leave Mauritius when the boulder fell. The British have left but

the obelisk of naked rock still resists erosion and cyclones.

Bertrand told me that they fired three guns to warn the people of Port Louis when a cyclone was approaching. Ships put to sea when the first gun sounded. When the second gun went those who lived outside Port Louis rushed to the railway station and packed into special trains. Everywhere householders went out with sledgehammers and iron bars and wedged the heavy hurricane shutters. When the third gun was fired the train service was suspended. During the 1894 cyclone a train passing over the St. Louis bridge near Pailles station was hurled into the river forty feet below. Strange to relate no one was killed. But during a severe cyclone the line is littered with fallen trees and telegraph posts.

Ships are lifted into fields along the coast. It is no weather for railway travel.

So the memories flooded back when I heard they were pulling up that marvellous old railway in Mauritius. It was no toy but a full four feet eight-and-a-half inch British gauge railway. It served the island for more than a century. From the antiquated coaches I saw the mosques and temples of Port Louis; the farm carts drawn by longhorned oxen; the cross-legged shopkeepers on their mats waiting for customers; Indian women heavy with gold ornaments; the rolling fields of sugar estates with unforgettable names: Solitude and Bean Sejour, Mon Tresor and Trianon, Savannah and Maison Blanche. I went southwards to Souillac and travelled along a narrow-

gauge branch line to a tea estate with the enchanting name of Bois Cheri. I peered into the Petite Riviere cave, blocked (so they say) to hide a pirate's treasure. I saw the landscape where the sad spirits of Paul and Virginie might have emerged at any moment from the greenery; an odd little world cut off by the wide ocean from twentieth century ideas. However, the locomotives were burning twenty thousand tons of imported coal a year and the planters whose ancestors had demanded a railway were sending their sugar down to Port Louis by road. So the last trains came back from Savanne and Montagne Blanche and Mapou and all those other lovely places. The railway works at Plaine Lauzon closed down. Scrap merchants bought the rails and passenger coaches became school shelters and seaside bungalows. I

suppose they have taken down the many warning signs: "Beware of the trains". The man in the blue uniform who walked along the Port Louis waterfront with a red flag, ringing a handbell, has lost his job. No more cows will be saved from death by the flared cowcatchers. Motorists who had to wait at level crossings will be pleased but I would not like to see Mauritius without its old romantic railway.

I touched on the menus of Mauritius, you may recall, when I visited the Port Louis markets. Like all men of French descent my friend Bertrand was an epicure and he knew the Mauritian specialities from the *bredies* to venison. Yes, they have *bredies* in Mauritius, meat and vegetable stews with flavours rather different from the Cape versions. The basic Mauritian

cooking is a blend of French and Indian traditions with the Chinese cuisine as a thing apart.

“We have some of the finest cooks and household servants in the world on this island”, Bertrand declared. “A poor chef is known as a *rosbif* cook, which is not exactly a compliment to the English residents. Our customs are entirely different. French Mauritians have the typical French *petit déjeuner* of coffee, rolls and fruit, lunch at eleven and an early dinner. The English follow the English system and go to bed much later than we do.”

Bertrand talked about the exotic dishes of the island. The early Portuguese callers brought monkeys from Ceylon to Mauritius. The monkeys are as large as spaniels. They roam the forests in bands of sixty or seventy, plunder remote homes, eat birds' eggs, ravage

banana groves and hide in the mountains. Creoles love roast monkey and so the raiders are kept in check. “Monkeys ride on the backs of stags - they get on very well together”, Bertrand went on. “There will be no shortage of venison for many years to come, but I do not care for it very much. It has not the flavour of the Scottish deer. Nevertheless the *chasse* is very popular here and I know one old man who has shot a thousand stags. Besides the monkeys there is another Portuguese legacy, the pigs or ‘Maroon hogs’ which have run wild. They taste better than the venison. I must also mention the bats, not vampires but fruit bats. They are knocked down in daylight as they hang from the trees and the flesh is excellent. But of course you have to know how to cook them, with spices

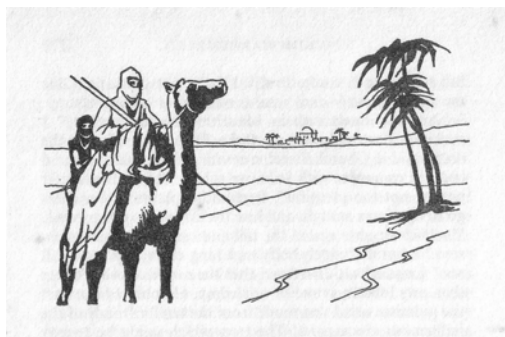
and condiments, as the skin and fur have a foxy odour. Properly done, a fruit bat tastes like a cross between hare and chicken.”

Bertrand said the stock dishes of the Mauritian cook were coconut soup, dressed crab, coconut curry and banana fritters. The *bredies* included one made from the young leaves of a plant of the arum species and another made from pumpkin shoots. Pimento and saffron were favourite ingredients as both were grown on the island. Bertrand spoke of the *beche de mer*, the sea slug that is such a great delicacy east of Suez, collected on the reefs of Mauritius at low tide, dried in the sun, smoked and made into soup. He said that sea urchins were wonderful eaten raw like oysters. Shearwaters, fat little birds, were dried and sold at the market. Many people in

Mauritius drank the local rum because it was cheap but Bertrand preferred the wines of France. “Our rum has a peculiar twang - or as they say in the trade a ‘hogo’”, remarked Bertrand. “They make fruit wine here, too, and a banana liqueur. But no, when it comes to drink I am not patriotic. Give me a fine claret!”

“And the finest dish in Mauritius - what is that?” I inquired. Bertrand took me to La Flore Mauricienne, the restaurant in Church Street, a century old at that time, and ordered *camarons* with palmiste salad. “It is a freshwater prawn, not too plentiful”, Bertrand explained. “Poachers go to the rivers at night and lure the *camerons* with torches. You slip a noose round the tail and out come your *camarons*. It has a six-inch body and long claws. But you will see.” I agreed with

Bertrand that the *camerons* were better than any lobster, crawfish or shrimp. He pointed out that the palmiste salad was made from the tender fronds of the indigenous areca palm. The tree, which might be twenty years old, was killed by the cutting of the shoots. That was certainly a mayonnaise to remember. Before we left La Flore Mauricienne I was shown the jams and jellies, pickles and preserves made on the premises from island fruits and vegetables. Order an *aperitif* in the courtyard of La Flore Mauritienne if you visit Mauritius and then go upstairs for a meal. It will remind you in some ways of Paris.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN HARBOURS ON THE NILE

CAIRO is a harbour, a great river harbour where the high-piled paddle steamers go upstream and the swallow-winged feluccas sail down to the sea with the cargoes they have carried for thousands of years. It is a harbour that has known Greek triremes and coastal patrol vessels flying the White Ensign. It is one of the three

harbour cities I know better than any others in the world - Cape Town, London and Cairo - because I had the time to absorb them.

One of my friends in Cairo told me so much about the city that I called her Sharazad. She claimed to be French, but the resemblance did not go much further than her excellent cuisine, the Beauvais tapestries and Louis XV furniture. She was a Cairene speaking French and Arabic and English; a quick-witted woman who had her fair share of the wisdom of the East. She had immense self-confidence and never doubted that her will would triumph. I wandered through the bazaars of Cairo with Sharazad until the city had indeed become one of my harbours of memory.

In the Street of the Gold Workers they knew Sharazad well and the jewellers

valued her praise as she drank their coffee in dark little dens among the goblets and perfume burners and the dishes inlaid with gold and silver. She chose her silks in the bazaar, showing rare taste. She listened to the rug-makers singing as they toiled, studied all the trades in the labyrinth of the Mousky, and all the people. And I walked beside her, learning and listening to her thousand tales.

I met the healer and easer of pain, Sheikh Ibrahim. Often I had seen him roving the streets with his cry of "*Inshadat ad Hamalat ya Metwaldi*", invoking the Moslem saint to remove the sorrows of illness. One day Sharazad had a headache and she paid the healer's fee. I think it was mainly curiosity that drew her to the little hole-in-the-wall consulting-room where the Sheikh treated his patients.

At the entrance rested the long staff decorated with shreds of cloth, wisps of veil, scraps of leather, all testimonials from the people he had cured. They tore off a portion of a garment near the afflicted spot and gave it to the healer to be nailed to the staff. Thus, the wily Sheikh intimated, the affliction would become fixed to the wood, a more satisfactory arrangement than having a pain in the flesh. The bearded Sheikh possessed one experienced seeing eye and a sightless eye which gave him a weird appearance. In his profession this could be regarded as an asset. He fixed Sharazad with a firm stare and soothed her in a well chosen stream of Arabic. "Your eyes are tired ... they are closing ... you are at rest ... the ache is vanishing ... it has gone ... it will not return." It cost her five piastres, and

she had purchased one of life's secrets cheaply.

Near the Al Azhar university there was a cafe for the wealthier Moslem students. Sometimes the aroma of stewed lamb, cooked in the Egyptian way with peaches, drew us to a table under the awning. Sharazad's appetite was restrained by a high regard for her weight and a fastidious sense of quality. She demanded the best of each kind, the finest mangoes grown by the Pashas, the sweetest white grapes, the pressed dates from Siwa oasis, the most luscious water-melons. The proprietor always served Sharazad himself. He found her full of appreciation for skilful effort and brought her special dishes of egg plant stuffed with rice and minced-meat or grilled kebabs on skewers. These oriental banquets

were typical of a woman who sought variety every day of her life and kept the "*Rubaiyat*" at her bedside. Omar, she had decided, spoke the truth. Life was meant to be lived.

As a rule I met Sharazad on the terrace of the Continental-Savoy, an hotel which is as much a part of Cairo as the Pyramids. It has an immense khaki-coloured façade, all shutters and balconies. You see people everywhere from roof to terrace. It is no ordinary caravan-serai.

The Continental-Savoy has a glamour that will only be perceived if you stay there long enough. Under that roof anything can happen and almost everything has happened. The whole story of the Continental-Savoy will never be told. It has gone like the flood-waters of the Nile, lost for

ever, scattered up and down the world in anecdote and narrative, confession and secret memory. But the great hotel, like the Arabian Nights, goes on endlessly. On the terrace imagination may succeed in making life stand still long enough for a flash of analysis. You may capture a fragment of the story, one fragment out of the years that have passed like the waters flowing out beyond Rosetta and Damietta. The terrace is a stage deserted in the sunny hours of the summer but gaining life and colour and movement as the sun goes down. Heavy ironwork provides an essential barrier between the hotel guests and the imploring hawkers and beggars in the street. The hotel is not really as old as it looks. The air of experience hanging so heavily over

the building, from terrace to back garden, has been left by the people of the hotel, a rich legacy paid in daily instalments.

Cuisine at the hotel is only moderate. Rooms are not luxurious. Many of the servants appear to be morons. But in spite of these defects there is something about the hotel; it has background, it has character. On the steps day after day the dragomans mount guard, more alert than any sentries, ready to open the wonders of Cairo. Show by a flicker that you need a dragoman and he is at your side. Enter the hotel and you might be in the booking-hall of a railway station. Art is represented by travel posters, air liners circling the Pyramids, scenes from Switzerland. The hushing sound of huge fans comes as a reminder of the distance from the Alps. Wicker

chairs and tables suggest an antidote to the climate. I preferred the bar at the entrance to the dining-room, for this was one of the corners that gave character to the hotel. The suave Russian barman had all the world's bottles at his disposal. Australian whisky glowed evilly beside Cape sherry. Egg-nog fabricated in Palestine stood next to the strong brandy of Cyprus and Dubonnet was on the shelf with Amontillado, vodka and Dom. The Russian, undismayed after years of refusal, still laboured under the false impression that customers yearned for the drinks of their own countries. He could tell nationality at a glance but he could never diagnose individual tastes.

Beside the obliging barman, hovering over the cash register, stood an apparently half-witted albino who

seemed to be having more fun than any other member of the hotel staff. Being an albino, it was impossible to guess his age, race or thoughts. He spent his days ringing up amounts and handing the tickets proudly across the bar. The Russian barman and the Arab waiters corrected his mistakes with a patience which was not shared by the drinkers. At rush hours the albino also poured drinks. Often they were the wrong drinks. The Russian smiled and poured the drinks back into the bottles or poured mixed drinks away. In spite of all mistakes the albino grinned and life went on at the hotel. That albino puzzled me for years, but now I have decided that he was not such a fool as he looked. He was there for some deep purpose.

Opposite the bar was the manager's office. There were two managers in

my day, Freddy the Swiss and Sammy the Egyptian. Both knew a great deal about the hotel and talked freely without ever saying an indiscreet word. A perfect combination, able to deal with any situation which might arise. I always found one or other of them in the polished, luxurious office. Turn right past the hall porter and there is the lounge. Ladies of the night (of the expensive class) were permitted to meet or make friends there and arrange their assignments. There and in the recesses of the hall they were within bounds. At the end of the lounge was the main bar of the hotel; and if you saw any feminine creature in there she would be of the same class as those outside; not a guest at the hotel. This bar was a comfortable, leather-seated room with a quick barman and two efficient

assistants. Yet I sometimes found myself missing the Russian and the albino and back I would stroll to the unorthodox bar.

The dining-room was a white, simple room with pillars and huge windows on to the terrace. So many black jacketed *maitres-d'hotel*, so many fezzed, white-robed Arab waiters stood among the tables that one imagined the service would be instantaneous; but only when you slowed down to the tempo of Egypt did you find life tolerable. Breakfast was served in a smaller *salle* at the back, with a glimpse of the garden. You could read your "Egyptian Mail" or "Le Journal d'Egypte", front page to pictures, before the tiny eggs arrived.

At the foot of the main staircase the atmosphere was religious, a trick

produced by stained-glass windows and a notice-board bearing invitations to Christian churches. But this was a caravanserai, not a cathedral. The lifts start at this point. The lift attendants, slim and stupid-looking Egyptians, carried a heavy responsibility for they were also in charge of the morals of the hotel. They had instructions from the management. Those who had booked rooms never ranked as sinners; but if one of the loose girls from the lounge stepped into the lift she was recognised instantly and denounced in Arabic. It was embarrassing for the escort, whose manner was already nervous. But that was the rule.

If you turned left after leaving the hall you could study the kitchens, savour the soups of the day, watch the small Aboukir soles being carried in, or poke your nose into a pantry stacked high

with olive bottles and tins of sardines. Outside the kitchen there was always a pile of the strange fuel of Egypt, the yellow slabs compounded of cotton-seed and camel-dung. It burnt with a typical acrid odour. Smell it after many years and you would see the past again, perhaps too vividly.

Every morning at six-fifteen a tall fezzed Nubian wearing a black jacket entered my room at the hotel and placed the tea tray beside my bed. He had an aquiline nose, a genuine smile and dignity. I could see the trees in the Ezbekieh Gardens from my room, the unspeakable pavements, the shoe-shine boys and walking-stick hawkers, the men selling dark glasses and unpostable postcards. In the summer I had to rest after lunch. No city in the world takes its siesta with more determination than Cairo. When I

awoke at four the Nubian would be at my bedside with more tea. But in the early mornings, the hot summer mornings, it was the first tram-car grinding round the corner into the Opera Square that woke me. Then I would stand on my balcony at dawn and think of Omar:

*Wake! For the Sun, who
scatter'd into flight
The Stars before him from the
Field of Night*

I visited other Cairo hotels, including the old Shepherd's. I drank at the Long Bar there when Joe the barman mixed his celebrated pick-me-up of gin, bourbon, lime juice, bitters, mint and dry ginger ale. I heard the story of a contest between a Canadian doctor and a Turkish prince; they drank fifty-two whiskies each and called it a day. But it was the Continental that gained

my affection. The mob felt the same way and spared it on the day when Shepherd's went up in flames.

I remember Cairo's houseboat harbour, that fascinating reach of the Nile near the Gezira Club where the long array of houseboats and river steamers cast their lights over the water. It was cooler there than in the city. The boats and the far, palm-fringed river bank made a theatrical backcloth. Sharazad took me to a party on board a luxurious two-decker. The event of the evening, planned by the host, was the *danse du ventre*, a dance that never fails to appeal to a male audience. Gipsy girls have danced it in the east through the centuries and a well-rounded gipsy girl danced it on board the house-boat that night. As it was a private party she wore only a skirt

and the bangles that blend with the music. She stood before the orchestra, which now gave out oriental sounds, and entered into the strange rhythm. Some who were there must have regarded it as erotic; the movements were seductive. Like a snake, perhaps, a snake following its master's flute. The gipsy held the audience with subtle body movements, not footwork, nothing but that sinuous rhythm, that remarkable control of the body muscles in tune with the quivering music.

Often I took Sharazad to the Russian Club. There was no hammer and sickle in that club. You were back in the Russia of the Czars, with bearded, departed monarchs staring down wistfully upon exiles sighing for the glorious period before the revolution. Excellent *bortsch* was

served in the dining-room. In the bar they drank a devastating vodka. Some of the men wore embroidered blouses; others were clearly not Russians at all, but merely shared a taste for alcohol with the genuine Russian members. They sat on high stools with their drinks in front of them. Sometimes they sang. They fraternised with strangers and they told long Russian stories and sang again. And always they drank.

I was often at the Groppi restaurants. Big Groppi, down in Soliman Pasha, had an open-air dance floor. Little Groppi, also known as Old Groppi, was a branch of the great Swiss house of food and entertainment and it was close to the Continental. Sharazad always bought her cakes there. In my old notebook I find that I went there one afternoon for two

paté au fromage, two chicken *paté* or *anchois*, one chocolate cake, a *salade Russe* and some little rolls. As I came out a horse-drawn coach, brilliantly gilded, appeared on the far side of the Opera Square. It was an astonishing display. Gilded angels decorated the roof and there was gilded scroll-work on the sides. The coachman wore a red fez. It was a hearse, so large and dazzling that for a moment it seemed to fill the square.

Aged beggars with tragic faces sprawled on the pavements at every corner reciting prayers. The streets were queer streams of life. Strings of laden camels swung across intersections while shining limousines rattled their klaxons. Men in starched pyjamas and women in black rags gazed into the plate glass windows of modern stores. An Arab band playing

bagpipes headed a bridal procession. Sellers of fly-whisks, razor-blades and socks pestered all who lingered and followed those who walked slowly.

Sometimes I went to a small Syrian restaurant in a sidestreet. You could dine outside in a charming white-walled courtyard with a palm tree growing in the middle. I ordered stuffed vegetable marrow, roast lamb and a red wine from Damascus. Sharazad showed me how to cut a mango neatly round the centre and pull out the stone. Pickled cucumbers and plates of beans were served as side dishes and we ate the flat loaves of Egypt.

That was blazing Cairo, the great desert city with its dusty gardens. Cairo, where a spy gave her belly-dance at the Continental roof cabaret

while soldiers were being killed a hundred miles away. Cairo, with the ashes of secret documents rising in the wind during the retreat to Alamein. Cairo, city of cool modern flats and mud-huts, camels and donkeys. Cairo, where the *khamisin* wind blows a fine dust over everything and raises a thirst that some quench with mango juice. Cairo, where I ate the huge Red Sea prawns at the restaurant called St. James, the same Victorian place of refreshment built for those old British travellers who landed at Alexandria and travelled overland to Suez on the way to India. Cairo, with its old harbour on the east bank near the Babylon of the Romans. Cairo, split by the brown Nile, the long river that still carries fleets of small craft northwards when the current runs fast

to the Mediterranean. Cairo, where the feluccas come in with the north wind to the old Bulak harbour where Napoleon's soldiers disembarked. Cairo is indeed a great harbour of memories and there are times when I remember Cairo too well.

Cairo is the greatest of the Nile harbours but the smaller river ports have a fascination of their own. I remember the vast empty desert of grey sand with the Nile as the only contrast. Now and again you see villages like forts behind walls of mud. Boat-builders are at work, following the designs of centuries ago. Here is a field of sugar-cane with the red splashes of poppies; there are ancient cities, tombs and temples. And always the thread runs through the vision, the river with its narrow greenery.

These river harbours quiver in the heat and almost blind you. How can people live in such a furnace? It is a relief to steam away southwards from Khartoum in a river steamer, south up the White Nile towards the swamps. The pulse-beat of the engines underfoot gives promise of a mild breeze. The steamer is a stern-wheeler. Barges are lashed to each side, barges loaded with cargo and black passengers. White passengers live on the steamer's upperdeck. Their saloon is in the open air, tables are set round the funnel and at night the funnel glows a dull red in the darkness. They sleep in a netted space further forward; the "bug hut" they call it. The mosquito-proof gauze shuts out the insects but admits the odours of African cooking from the lower-deck. Some ships have bars. I recall one in which passengers carried

their own bottles or bought whisky from the Greek captain. The passengers were officials and traders. In this company the traveller hears the gossip of the river harbours and the tales of the halfexplored, half-unknown land of a million square miles, the Sudan. Sometimes the steamer pulls in to a jetty with a line of grass huts and a crowd of naked Shilluk warriors or tall Dinkas. The thermometer stands resolutely at a steamy hundred and ten. Cargo rolls on shore, the whistle sounds and the ship pushes on upstream.

This is the Sudd region and the river is choked with papyrus grass of a poisonous green colour. Ships pick their way with care. This water-world of the southern Sudan is like a Sargasso Sea. Only the natives can be moderately sure of survival. Steamers

have to battle with the sinister floating grass. Day after day the steamer plods along, following a drunken, zigzag course as the helmsman dodges sandbanks and shallows. You smell woodsmoke and sand. On the river bank there are small trees and scrub; and beyond stretches the immense flatness. Hippo, dug-out canoes, velvet-black bodies wading with nets or standing with shields and spears. Drums, the crackle of red fires in the darkness and the thumping of the steamer's engines. Bamboo palisades, vultures on a tree, native girls pounding grain. A long panorama of barbaric Africa and then another inland harbour on the bank of Old Father Nile.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

SUEZ MAGIC

WHEN I travelled in a slow "round Africa" steamer more than forty years ago I called for the first time at the ports of Egypt and watched entertainments that were old before recorded history. I saw Port Said, a fabricated place with more charm than some people care to admit. I liked it at first sight and grew fond of the sleepless town when I came to know it better two decades later. On this first visit I went on shore gladly while the ship was invaded by dusky MacGregors selling fly whisks and beads; by guides and fortune-tellers, by hundreds of sweating Arabs with coal-baskets on their heads. I dined well at the Eastern Exchange Hotel and went out into the garden to watch a conjurer. Egypt is full of

wandering minstrels and acrobats, jugglers, animal trainers and other more or less entertaining vagabonds. I think Egypt is their ancestral home. Fakirs are buried alive and emerge from the ordeal like hibernating bears. Little girls appear to ride the air. The nasal whine of the gourd flute is heard in every tourist resort as bored cobras emerge from their baskets. Sword swallows learn at an early age to find the straight line between mouth and pit of stomach. You may see a man take a bowl of water in his teeth and turn a somersault without spilling a drop; but you are more likely to encounter a baboon riding a goat. Two thousand years before Christ an Egyptian princess declared that she could never be killed by dagger or sword; and she proved it by lying in

a mummy-case into which knives and swords were thrust; a trick that still draws the crowd. Here are magicians who claim they can decapitate a goose, or a boy, and restore the head as soon as the right amount of money is forthcoming. Steaming rice comes out of a cauldron without visible fire, Thanks to double bottoms and cunning boxes the onlookers see a bean transformed into a scorpion, and vice versa. Holy men lie on beds of spikes, as they do further East, always making sure that the spikes are close together. They bite iron bars and swallow fire. In my schooldays I read text-books on such tricks and learnt some of the basic principles. But that night at Port Said I watched a show that was not in any of my books.

The garden at the Eastern Exchange was not lit brilliantly for the electric globes were shaded and restful. Nevertheless I could see the performer clearly enough, a mild, light-skinned Egyptian of about thirty wearing a long European jacket over his *galabyeh*. Possibly he had been earning his living as a conjurer for twenty years. He came forward with a long bamboo fishing-rod equipped with reel, float and hook. "Watch the hook all the time - watch very carefully," advised the conjurer. On hearing this obvious piece of misdirection I tried to watch his hands as well as the hook. He cast out into the open garden, rod sweeping widely, hook dancing. "Watch the hook now - watch!" urged the conjurer. And at that moment a live fish appeared on

HARBOURS OF MEMORY



"At that moment a *live* fish appeared on the hook. The conjurer let it wriggle there for a few moments; then took it off and dropped it into a bowl of water".

the hook. The conjurer let it wriggle there for a few moments; then he took it off and dropped it into a bowl of water. I was absolutely certain that he had not slipped it down the line with his hands, but the sudden vision of the fish baffled me completely.

Nearly two decades passed. I was in Suez on a mission I have described elsewhere.² Full moon that night and the transit camp was being heavily bombed. I found myself in a dugout with a handsome, middle-aged British officer I had met in the mess that evening. He had told me vaguely that he had something to do with camouflage. Many officers were vague about their duties; we all knew the penalties for careless talk. "I was on the stage

before the war, so they found me a suitable job," he had remarked.

"Did you see the *gulla-gulla* who came to the camp today?" I asked.

"A poor type, I thought," replied the officer. "Cutting a turban and joining it, hauling yards of silk out of his mouth, the salaaming duck - very old stuff. I live in hopes of seeing something really original but it seldom happens."

I told him about the fishing-rod trick. He waited until the flashes and the "grumfff" of high explosives had passed for a time and then he commented: "That's a good trick. Depends on apparatus, of course, but it always brings a loud round of applause."

"You know how it is done?"

² In my book "Where Men Still Dream," published by Timmins.

“Oh yes. You see, I’m a magician in civil life. I can explain that one. The fish is hidden in the float, kept alive by wet sponges. The main fishing line is fitted with small rings, and a thin secondary line runs to the float. When the conjurer jerks the thin line the hinged float opens for a fraction of a second and the fish slips down and appears to be wriggling on the hook. It is just a matter of opening and shutting the float so quickly that no one notices it. Many conjurers in Europe and America have copied that trick but I am convinced that it was invented in Egypt long ago.”

So pleased was I with this revelation that I was almost prepared to welcome a continuation of the bombing. “Are there any tricks that baffle the professional magician?” I inquired.

“Yes. Some are tricks but most would be better described as illusions. Those miraculous tales you hear, the rope trick and other forms of levitation, plants growing before the eyes of the audience, people who vanish after being set on fire; these are illusions, but not all who claim to have seen these things are liars. Such illusions come from the days when the East was civilised and Europe was not. Somewhere a long way back, probably in Egypt, there arose a caste of magicians, jugglers, snake-charmers and other weird performers. They may or may not have been gypsies, but they were certainly wanderers. Probably they acquired some of their knowledge during visits to India. They understood the uses of alcohol and such drugs as Indian hemp; they were hypnotists and mind-readers. You will find references

to these people in many ancient works, the hieroglyphics of Egypt, the Upanishads of the Indus, and it is clear that the writers were describing marvels which they believed they had witnessed. In recent years King Haakon VII of Norway informed Rosita Forbes the explorer that the rope trick had been performed in his honour in Tunis. It appeared to be genuine but a member of his staff photographed the scene and all the pictures showed the magician, his assistant and the rope on the ground. Colonel Barnard, chief of police in Calcutta early this century described the rope trick, and Lord Frederick Hamilton recorded it. Carl Hertz the stage magician travelled to the East with all the lore of the white illusionist at his finger-tips. He declared that the rope trick was put on only by the very

finest performers who saw to it that there were only a few Europeans in the audience. They could hypnotise four or five people at a time. Though the Indians in the crowd realised what was going on they applauded their fellow-countryman and never gave him away."

My companion reminded me of the story that went round London years ago of a stone lion in Trafalgar Square. The lion was said to have shaken its tail and thousands thought they had seen it. A few people in that mood would attend a performance of the rope trick and after the magician had addressed each one in turn and created a receptive state of mind they would see what they expected to see. Western magicians had put on stage versions of the rope trick with the aid of apparatus. Carl Herz invented a

method and J. N. Maskelyne had done it in his London theatre. Eastern performers had given open-air shows with the aid of a strong incense that deadened the perceptions. They chose a courtyard between two houses, rigged a wire from roof to roof, and started work at dusk. Clouds of smoke hid the wire. The rope had a hook which caught the wire and the boy vanished by hauling himself across to one of the houses. Another of the old Eastern families of magicians had a more realistic presentation. They found a way of projecting a series of pictures on a column of whitish smoke so that a boy appeared to be climbing the rope into the sky. "Of course the pure illusion depending on will-power and persuasion is rare and I would enjoy such an experience enormously," declared the magician.

"I have had to content myself up to now with the clever efforts of politicians whose promises have had no more substance than the rope trick."

I asked my companion for his views on the mango trick. This he had seen on many occasions and he said the performers varied widely in skill. Nearly always nowadays it was pure conjuring. The trick went right back to the Upanishads and a Sanskrit comment two thousand years ago remarked: "A young mango tree sprouts forth from seeds, which are really only glamour. The tree is also nothing more than glamour. So it is with all things." Jehangir, King of Delhi in the early seventeenth century, employed magicians who grew not only mangoes but fig trees, apples, walnuts, almonds and

mulberries; and birds of great beauty appeared in the branches; melodious songsters such as the world had never known before.

The ordinary performer makes a little hillock of earth, plants the seed, sprinkles the earth with water and covers it with a turban cloth. When he removes the cloth a green shoot has appeared and a clever magician will pull the shoot from the earth and show the roots sprouting. At each stage of this slow and sometimes boring trick the tree grows, more and more leaves and branches appear, and finally the fruit is plucked and given to members of the audience to taste. Some people assert that they saw the tree growing before their eyes. They are often convinced that a secret method of forcing the growth has been used.

“Most performers prefer the mango because the seed is large enough to hold a shoot,” explained the officer. “A palm, tea plant or banana would be more difficult. Mango leaves and twigs are tough and can be folded carefully without breaking. They can be rolled into tight balls and hidden in the cloth until the time comes to assist the growth of the tree. It is just a matter of preparation and *legerdemain*. Robert Houdin the French magician (not Houdini) produced a Western version with an orange tree which blossomed and bore fruit. At the finale an orange at the top of the tree split open and revealed a handkerchief borrowed from a spectator.”

Robert Houdin, I gathered, was the pioneer of scientific conjuring. He was sent to Algeria by the French Government in the middle of last century to

expose the marabouts who were stirring up revolts. The authorities hoped that Houdin's brand of sorcery would make the Algerian holy men look like childish impostors. Houdin certainly impressed his audiences with a box trick which depended on an electro-magnet; it became light or heavy on his orders and it defeated all the efforts of the bewildered Algerian sorcerers. However, the marabouts swallowed glass and devoured thorns and thistles and Houdin did not care to follow their example. One marabout struck his left arm with his right hand; the flesh appeared to open and blood poured out; then the marabout passed his hand over the wound and the blood disappeared. Houdin also watched a marabout swallowing an egg without breaking it; and this man also ate nails and pebbles and hit his stomach with

his fist so that the contents rattled audibly. Other marabouts drank boiling oil. The sensitive French magician was obviously puzzled by these antics but he suggested that the sorcerers had used alum to protect themselves against different forms of heat.

My friend the magician had turned to other oriental tricks and illusions when the ack-ack fire died away as the enemy bombers left the bleak Suez scene. I decided that magic was a fine remedy for the alarms and irritations of war and I wanted to meet the magician again. "I shall be here for the next few days and I often go to the Misr Hotel in Suez for dinner," he told me as we stumbled away to our tents and stretchers.

Next evening found me in the Misr bar drinking with the magician and looking forward to a dinner menu that

would come as a change from bully beef and tinned potatoes. And indeed we fared well for the lentil soup was followed by pigeon and there was a red Syrian wine and cheese. "You were telling me about oriental feats and illusions," I reminded the magician.

"Ali yes, the wonders which cannot be explained by the Maskelyne or Houdini methods. Oriental performers are prepared to risk their lives and suffer torments such as no Western magician would endure. In that class you have the fakirs who allow themselves to be buried alive. Their acts are genuine and I believe they rely on stupefying drugs; but I could not go into detail. Then you have the performer who enters a hot oven and is shut in with a raw steak.

When the door is opened the man is alive and the steak is cooked?"

A feat of a different sort is performed by an expert swordsman who puts a young girl flat on a table with a silken thread across her breast. He swings the broad, heavy sword half a dozen times to get the feel, then brings it down with a terrifying sweep that cuts the thread but does not touch the skin. Danger is a good teacher. He then described an illusion in which the magician transforms his assistant into a log of wood, chops up the log, sets fire to it and burns it. Of course the assistant comes up unharmed from the ashes. "Someone who watched this performance told me that he looked away once or twice while the flames were blazing," went on the magician. "When he looked up again there

were no flames, but after a time the flames and smoke re-appeared. So it was obviously hypnotism.” The basket trick, on the other hand, had a natural explanation. If you saw the magician wearing a heavy leather belt then you could be sure that the boy would seize the belt while covered by a blanket, slip quickly between the magician’s legs and escape with the aid of accomplices. Usually the boy circled inside the basket like an eel and kept out of the way of the prearranged sword thrusts. There is more room in a flexible basket than you might think. First-class performers use a bladder filled with human blood and offer the blood to any medical person in the audiences for analysis. The boy shrieks at first but then the cries die away and the magician laments: “I

have killed my child.” However, a voice comes from the back of the crowd and the boy (a double, wearing identical gaudy costume) steps forward. Occasionally an oblong basket is used with a double side at the back. The boy hides in this compartment and the basket can then be shown to be empty. A really clever variation is the basket trick in which a large oblong basket has a lid. The magician’s wife lies down in the basket and the lid is placed over her. When the magician lifts the lid the woman has vanished. She hooks her fingers and toes into the top of the basket and the success of the trick depends on the magician lifting her without apparent effort. This calls for superb acting and great strength.

Egyptian conjurers have a modern trick in which a brass bowl is shown with a lump of ice in the water. It is covered, and when the cloth is whipped off the water is hot. The bowl has double sides and a double-bottom, of course, the side spaces being filled with boiling water while the bottom is empty. Remove a wax pellet and the cold water runs out. A second pellet allows the hot water to run in and meet the ice.

The salaaming duck is the simplest trick of all, for there is a tiny hole in the bottom of the bowl. A fine silk thread fastened to the toy duck (and the magician's toe) ensures that the duck will obey orders. In a more ingenious version the duck leaps out of the water, usually while the magician is attending to something else with his back turned. This

mechanical effect depends on a spring which is released when the sugar holding it has melted.

Sand is used in a famous Egyptian trick. The magician drops the sand into a pail of water and the audience sees it lying on the bottom. He brings it out and blows it away as though it had never been in the water. Fine, clean sand is washed in hot water, dried in the sun and then cooked with lard in a frying pan. Every particle of sand is covered with grease and so it remains dry under water.

Blue, red and yellow sugar are the ingredients in a trick which has baffled many audiences in Egypt. The magician swallows the various sugars, opens his mouth wide, and then asks the onlookers to name a colour. Blue? He blows out blue sugar. Red? Yellow? So it goes on.

He has indeed swallowed the sugar, but additional capsules have been hidden in his mouth between the teeth and cheeks. All that remains is to work the required capsule to the front, break it and blow out the sugar. In this category is the Egyptian scent trick, where the performer focuses a burning glass on a piece of cotton-wool and the perfume of any desired flower (within reason) rises with the smoke. This is ordinary conjuring, of course, a matter of opening the correct phial at the right moment.

When the Egyptian conjurer senses a hostile audience he threatens them with a plague of invisible ants. Soon the onlookers feel an irritation of the hands, a hideous crawling sensation which cannot be brushed off. The conjurer will remove the spell for a

consideration but it takes some time. The effect is produced by an irritant powder which he sprinkles unobtrusively on the backs of as many hands as possible. Even those who have not been "treated" often share the unpleasant sensation as a result of suggestion.

Levitation tricks, said my friend, depend on hidden steel rods, goose-neck bars, iron posts and rings, steel harness and wires; every sort of support that can be hidden from the audience. It was a simple matter to make a woman float on air in a theatre; far more difficult in the open air. Years ago there was a woman in Egypt who was greatly admired for a levitation performance which involved something more than apparatus. The act was arranged behind a large shawl, but in full sunlight. When the

shawl dropped she was seen to be sitting two feet above the ground with her wrist on the hilt of a sword. The support was provided by a hidden loop of wire attached to the sword hilt. It was such a difficult feat that she had to hold her breath and balance herself in the loop until the shawl was raised again.

“Always look for a natural explanation,” advised the magician. “If you see a man sitting cross-legged in the air with his arm resting on a bamboo you may be sure there is an elaborate system of supports linked with the bamboo. It’s a nerve-racking business. You never step in front of an audience without wondering whether something will go wrong. There is an element of chance. You dare not say what is going to happen next in case it does not happen. Some tricks depend on a

carefully planned accident. The magician spends his life appealing to his audience to look in the wrong direction, away from what he must hide. One careless movement of the eyes may give the secret away. A trick is a comedy or a drama, and the magician must be a polished actor and a psychologist.”

He described an Egyptian trick that had earned his respect. The conjurer handed him a round piece of earthenware and a charcoal pencil and invited him to make the sign of the cross on the earthenware. After a short talk on the cross and the crescent the conjurer had asked him to shatter the earthenware. “Now look at your hand,” said the conjurer; and there was the mark of the cross on the palm, a replica of the earthenware cross. Only by thinking back and considering every

detail did my friend realise that the Egyptian had, at one stage, taken the earthenware in his own hand. At that moment he had taken the charcoal imprint, and had transferred it by pretending to show how the piece of earthenware should be held. The most artistic part of the trick was the patter about the cross and the crescent, designed to obliterate the memory of the essential part of the trick.

I had once been puzzled by a decapitation show. The boy who was to be beheaded lay on the sands of Egypt and the conjurer drew a white cloth over him "to stop the blood from spurting on the people." I was invited to test the sharp blade of a great curved sword. After a careful arrangement of the cloth the boy's neck appeared to be ready for the fatal stroke. Down came the sword, the

cloth was stained with blood, spectators reeled back in horror. The conjurer kicked the head away from the body but it remained under the cloth. Then he offered to restore the boy to life if enough piastres were dropped into his basket. As you might expect, the boy emerged from the cloth with his head on his shoulders.

"Easy," chuckled the magician. "The boy tucks his head under his arm and blows up a bladder to take its place. Takes a bit of rehearsal, that's all."

I asked the magician to describe the most dangerous stage performances he had ever seen and I mentioned Houdini's "water torture" escape. "Houdini never ran any risk of drowning," he replied. "But it was a magnificent trick. Houdini's ankles were fastened and he was lowered head first into a glass cell filled with

water. Sometimes a dairy supplied milk instead of water. The cell was sealed and bolted and the curtains were drawn. Within a minute he was out, the cell still filled almost to the brim, Houdini streaming with water. The trick called for extreme agility and the ability to hold the breath under water. But as I said, it was not dangerous. Valves were fitted within reach of his hands - which were not tied - and he could let the water out fast if he failed to escape. He had plenty of room to double his body, and then he lifted the lid by one of his mechanical contrivances which he never revealed. No one has ever been able to imitate that trick.”

“What about those shooting acts?”

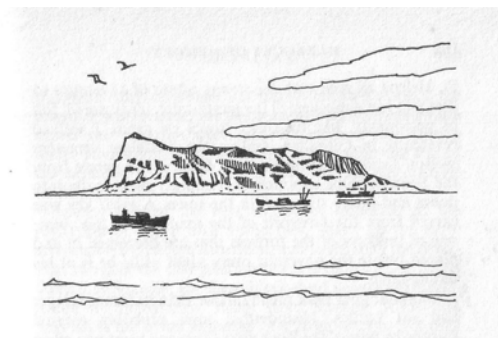
“Very hazardous,” admitted the magician. “In the old days it was done with a bullet made of candle wax

covered with lamp-black. The real bullet was switched for the harmless one at the last moment, and the performer hid the lead bullet in his mouth and spat it out on to a plate when the gun went off, as though he had caught it in his mouth. Then a magician known as Chung Ling Soo, who was really an American, invented a sensational variation. His assistant fired a live cartridge with a genuine bullet and Ching Ling Soo caught the bullet on a plate. His survival depended on reducing the charge of powder so that the bullet hit the plate with considerably less than the normal force. Of course it was a very tough plate. One night the bullet glanced off the plate and entered the heart of Chung Ling Soo. In spite of his death there are still a few magicians using that method.”

I remember the end of our conversation that night in Suez. The magician was not inclined to treat with contempt the oriental school of magic as so many European stage illusionists had done. "Nearly all our tricks come from the East," he declared. "Their performers had the linking rings centuries ago, they had speaking heads and mechanical figurines that seemed to possess brains. I think they have always practised telepathy, and there is evidence of prophecies which rules out sheer chance. Here in Egypt westwards to Morocco and eastwards to China, there is a great deal of strange and unfathomable knowledge. They do have secrets unknown to Europeans."

Some time after my meeting with the magician I heard that wooden aircraft were being set out in rows on fake aerodromes in the desert. They looked

most realistic from the air and were designed to draw the enemy's fire. I suspected my friend the magician of taking part in that game. Unfortunately word of this trick reached the enemy and I was told that wooden bombs had been found among the dummy aircraft. I suppose there were magicians on both sides in the desert war.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN GIBRALTAR

"Halt! Who goes there?"

"The Keys."

"Whose Keys?"

"King George's Keys."

"Pass, King George's Keys."

WAR brought the South African Air Force to Gibraltar to sweep the oceans with their flying-boats. At the Land-port Gate the men with eagle badges

and red tabs observed the ceremonial traditions of the Rock, marching out past the sentries to patrol the approaches and give warning of surprise attack. "Pass, King George's Keys!"

Twice in my life I have passed through that old arched gateway and I would go back happily for a third time. Gibraltar arouses in me the same emotions as certain other tiny, historic British outposts. Gibraltar, Aden and St. Helena all reek with the strong odour of adventure so that you can almost smell the gunpowder. They are all full of personality, like no other towns on earth. I walked reverently in Gibraltar, and in the Trafalgar cemetery Nelson's sailors surrounded me. Cedarwood panels from the Spanish ships captured at Trafalgar were made into doors and tables still

used in the town. A great key was carved from the bowsprit of the man-o'-war *San Juan*; one of the keys of the fortress that are drummed in and placed before the governor every night while he is at his dining-table.

Gibraltar goes back much further than its famous sieges and sea battles. Neanderthal man probably entered Europe by way of the Rock sixty thousand years ago when there was a land bridge from Africa. Abbe Breuil, who searched the caves of South Africa, found paleolithic fossils in the Gibraltar limestone caves; elephant, rhino, hyena and leopard bones, animals of African origin. Deep in the Rock the delving priest unearthed human skulls and stone axes and weapons of flint, bronze and silver. One day the Abbe was out for a walk and by sheer chance he came upon a

Mousterian shelter where primitive man lived forty thousand years ago. You may inspect casts of prehistoric skulls in the Gibraltar museum. The Rock ranks with Taungs and Pekin, Olduvai and Java, as a source of raw material for the fantastic and probably erroneous guesswork of scientists seeking the origins of mankind.

I found the modem Gibraltarians held my attention longer than the skulls in the museum. About twenty-four thousand members of this little race live on the Rock. They have the unpleasant nickname of "rock scorpions", based not on the insect but on a scorpion-shaped plant that grows in Gibraltar. George Borrow, the gypsy author, described himself as a "rock lizard" born in Gibraltar of English parents; but these and other nicknames give a false impression of the pleasant

and intelligent people who have grown up in Gibraltar since the British occupation nearly three centuries ago. All the Spanish inhabitants cleared out when Admiral Rooke's licentious marines stormed the town. A wise retreat, for the women who remained were raped and churches were sacked. Dutch troops serving under Rooke joined in the fun, and only after the last of the captured wine had been drunk were the officers able to restore order.

Settlers entered the new colony of Gibraltar at the invitation of the British authorities. Many of the early arrivals were Genoese fishermen, and to this day the dominant strain in the Gibraltarian blend is Italian. You might think it is Spanish, for these black-eyed people are Andalusian in appearance, many have Spanish wives

and Spanish is the home language of a large section. Yet they are different and those who know the Rock people can tell the difference at a glance. Gibraltarians have Maltese blood; a sprinkling of Levantines came in long ago; Moors added a small element to the mixture; and, of course, there were the time-expired soldiers and sailors from the British Isles who remained in Gibraltar with the girls they married there. I must not forget the Jewish strain which has made the Gibraltarian a formidable business man. And let us not overlook the Irish, who left something more than such names as O'Reilly in this strange fusion. Indians own dozens of shops in Main Street. They are Gibraltarians, too, but they form a separate colony. In sentiment the Gibraltarians are more British than the British. Wealthy merchants send

their sons to British universities, where they are regarded almost as foreigners. And when Spain demands the return of Gibraltar these people write slogans on the pock-marked walls that have resisted all sieges. "British we are and British we stay." The spirit is exactly the same as that which inspired a British Governor more than two centuries ago when he replied to a Spanish ultimatum in these words: "Why sir, if you dare to give me any more of your damned nonsense I will kick you from Hell to Hackney!"

In the telephone book the names of the Gibraltarians range from Aboab to Zino. In between, the majority of the names are Spanish, but you also find descendants of the Genoese, the Robbas, Stagnos and Dellipianis; a number of Maltese names such as

Azzopardi, Spiteri and Vella; and, of course, the MacGillivrays and Hendersons; a Davies or Evans who has never seen Wales; the Browns and the Baileys. But in Gibraltar a Ramirez is usually indistinguishable from a Marshall or MacIntosh. Early last century there were only about three thousand Gibraltarians, but prosperity multiplied the little race by eight. They dress well and spend freely. Watch them in the fascinating market near the Waterport and you will see that they have a high regard for the pleasures of the table. Moors in vivid robes sell fowls, eggs and basket work. Spanish stall holders offer pumpkins and eggplants, green and red pimentos, muscatel grapes and muskmelons, figs and oranges. Red steaks are cut from enormous tunny fish. You can buy fresh sardines, octopus or stonebass.

Here are eels and bream and the red scorpion fish they serve cold with vivid salads. You never know what to expect in this town of contrasts. Gibraltarians like their cheap Scotch whisky but they do not spurn the Spanish sangria, that delicious blend of red wine and fruit. Shark appears on Gibraltarian tables more often than kippers. I saw lamb from New Zealand and veal from Galicia. Here are the only people on earth, perhaps, who enjoy the British eggs and bacon for breakfast and a Spanish paella for lunch. Partly Spanish in outlook and temperament, the Gibraltarian is more vigorous and far more enterprising than the Spanish. These people who use English as their second language are entirely British in sentiment. Here the Ansaldos and Bagnasios, Botibols and Bencazars join fervently in

singing "God Save the Queen." They love football and bullfights, cricket, music, wine and gambling. They are law-abiding citizens nowadays, and the words of a British politician spoken early this century are no longer true: "For the two hundred years that we have held this town we have made it a resort of smugglers, gypsies, vagabonds, African rogues and Spanish rebels." Today the Rock is a modern colony, remarkably clean for such an overcrowded place. If there is any unpleasant behaviour the guilty ones are probably visitors. Certainly there are *contrabandistas*, but these are usually the poor Spaniards who try to carry home those coveted articles which are so much cheaper in Gibraltar; coffee and cigars, liquor and cigarettes. La Linea, just over the border, is a dirty town of beggars

and pimps, smugglers and thieves. No wonder the comfortable Gibraltarian clings to the British Crown.

Gibraltarians speak a rather clipped, staccato English and mix it with slurred Spanish words, so that the newcomer may be as baffled as a person hearing the swift Afrikaans-English transitions used in South Africa. My taxi-driver said to me as we turned back to the Rock after a drive across the border: "We go to Spain for pleasure, but I always feel a sort of relief when I return to the freedom of Gibraltar." I could see that he loved the Rock, for that was his only true home though he spoke of Britain as "home". Gibraltar, with its own paper money, its own postage stamps, the weekly lottery, the low taxation, the mild and pleasant climate, disturbed only now

and then by a harsh Saharan wind. Their beloved little "Gibraltar Chronicle" is one of the oldest daily newspapers in the world. They call their policemen "bobbies", and outwardly these helmeted men in blue are identical with the London police.

Take a stroll along Main Street on a lively morning when the passengers are pouring on shore with their money from a cruise ship. Watch the storekeepers supplying them happily with French perfumes, cheaper here than in Paris, and Scotch whisky at a fraction of the Glasgow price. Listen to the sounds. I remember a bereted Spanish fishhawker with his cry of "*pescado!*" From barracks and harbour come bugle calls. Often there are military bands and more often the Spanish *flamenco* music drifts out of the cafes. You may hear the rattle of

castanets breaking through a choir practice in the cathedral. Hooves clatter in the roadway, for horse-drawn carriages have not yet disappeared. Donkeys pass with their side baskets and there are many handcarts filled with fruit among the slow moving cars and cyclists. Hindus emerge from their doorways to offer rolls of silk. Officers of the British services form a contrast with the gaping tourists and Spanish workmen. Glance up and on romantic wrought-iron balconies you will catch a glimpse of family life and hear the cage-birds singing. This is indeed an exotic Mediterranean seaport, full of sunlight and colour, but also displaying fresh paint, clean pavements, a British tidiness and polish.

Main Street has four different names along its narrow length; Waterport, Main, Church and Southport. You must be a good walker here, for much of the town can be reached only on foot. Old stone stairways lead off the main thoroughfare into a maze of passages. This intriguing place is full of resounding, English names: Benjamin's Alley and Devil's Cap Road, Bell Lane, Black Hole where soldiers were once punished, Cannon Lane, Cloister Ramp, Cornwall's Parade, Portuguese Town and Convent Place. When you are thirsty there are the Bull and Bush, Cock and Bottle, the Fox and Hounds, the Bell and Mitre. Some of the tea-rooms and grocers might have been transplanted from an English village. Always there are the historic names: Casemates Square, King's Bastion,

South Barrack Road. Yet the Gibraltarians still use some of the vanished Spanish street names when they are talking among themselves. Centuries slip away as they speak of the Calle de los Cordoneros, the Calle de Santa Anna, the Calle Real. Long ago there were just two parallel streets in Gibraltar, linked by lanes; and these became Main Street and Irish Town. Irish Town is a street, not a town, and it gained the name because of the characters who settled there. Sometimes you detect a touch of the Irish brogue in the everyday speech of the Gibraltarian. This is because he is usually a Roman Catholic and his schoolmasters were probably Irish priests.

Over the many steps and stairs, ramparts and chapels of Gibraltar, hangs the grey breath of old age. In

the narrow streets you become aware of other aromas; the perfume of tangerines and bananas; mimosa and orange blossom, roses and jasmine and the purple bougainvillea. Festooning ancient pink walls. Often you return unexpectedly to the remote past. In the governor's garden there is a dragon tree more than one thousand years old, the oldest of its species in the world, a great rarity yielding the dark resin called dragon's blood. Dragon trees flourished in Africa during the Ice Age, and then became extinct save on certain islands and a few remote places. Gibraltar's dragon tree seems to be among the many links between the Rock and Africa twenty miles away.

When I first landed at Gibraltar there was a British racecourse on Spanish soil. There, beyond the neutral zone,

the people of Gibraltar had their golf links and polo grounds; and the Royal Calpe Hunt pursued the fox in the woods and coverts of Spain. These amenities have vanished. A rather dangerous airstrip has been built on British ground and limestone from the Rock has been used to extend the runway into the bay.

Now for the Rock itself, that limestone mountain dominating the narrow Mediterranean entrance. It looks tremendous from the sea; but the Gibraltar peninsula is only three miles long, one third of a mile wide and fourteen hundred feet high. Sometimes it resembles Lion's Head, at others a hump-backed whale. Victorians saw in it a profile of Gladstone. Really it is just a silver grey limestone rock with houses of the same grey stone and slopes covered with cactus and pines

and dark green olive trees growing wild.

This great symbol of impregnability holds a city within the massive rock. Miles of mysterious tunnels and galleries run between the steep faces. The cliffs are honeycombed with gun-ports built during the great sieges. I was told that people sheltering in the city within the Rock would be safe from any explosive yet devised by man, including the hydrogen bomb. Not even Table Mountain has a more dramatic profile. No other mountain hides so many secrets. Huge reservoirs inside the Rock are fed by water catchments on the rock face, and with a rainfall of thirty-five inches there is never a shortage. Workshops, stores and a hospital, barracks and a railway have been built within the limestone.

Besides the man-made passages there are many natural caves and new caves are discovered from time to time. However, the exploration of the inner Rock is a hazardous affair. Over the years, men have gone down with their candles and balls of string and have never returned to the surface. Now the “killer caves” have been classified but those who would enter them must first sign indemnity forms. St. Michael’s Cave, one thousand feet above sea level, is a place of remarkable beauty and the greatest wonder of the Rock. A Roman geographer described it in the days of Augustus Caesar. In the lofty hall are stalactite pillars fifty feet high. Last century it was the duelling ground of the garrison officers. A manuscript I read in the Gibraltar museum called it “a gloomy yawning

fissure of a very sinister character where more than one unfortunate has met with foul play, being enticed within the cave by some assassin and after being plundered has been pushed into a horrible gulf”. St. Michael’s leads into other halls, and as recently as 1942 military engineers discovered a lovely grotto and an underground lake. Electricity has transformed this natural cathedral. Musicians love the acoustics and famous orchestras have performed there.

Catalan Bay, a flattish alcove on the sheer eastern side of the Rock, is another of Gibraltar’s odd spots. Here the first Genoese fishermen settled and some families have remained pure Italian and have never moved away. They form a distinct colony among the Gibraltarians, like

the Sephardim Jews and the Indians. A modern hotel has arisen over the hot little fishing village, and the population (about three hundred between the wars) has grown in recent years. Catalan Bay has known disastrous falls of rock at long intervals like Jamestown on St. Helena and the people still talk of old tragedies and narrow escapes.

I am an incorrigible seeker after rarities and high up on the Rock my taxi-driver pointed out a truly unique plant. This was the local candytuft, *Iberis Gibraltarica*, throwing out masses of lilac-coloured flowers. You may admire the wild flowers on these heights, narcissus and asphodel, growing over rusty cannon; but the candytuft grows wild nowhere in Europe save on the Rock. On the pine-scented heights many other wild

flowers flourish, and herbs such as sage and rosemary, thyme and marjoram. Sir Bartle Frere, son of the old Cape governor, was a botanist; and in Gibraltar early this century he counted more than five hundred local plants.

Once the golden eagle nested on vast piles of sticks in remote crevices of the Rock but I doubt whether you will find one today. Bearded vultures were also at home there and one or two pairs may survive. A game bird found on the Rock and nowhere else in Europe is the Barbary partridge. It shares this distinction with the apes, the inescapable apes. I shall soon be ready to go in search of the apes.

Europa Point, at the southern end of the Rock, has a famous lighthouse. Often two hundred ships pass in a day. Here the nuns kept a light burning four

centuries ago. Here is one of the world's finest views; Algeciras bay and La Isle Verde to the north; the purple hills of Africa twenty miles to the south. One resident loved the view so much that he asked to be buried under the floor of the Moorish ruins near the lighthouse. His wish was carried out, and the spot is known as Deadman's Hole.

Any large city park would have room and to spare for Gibraltar. The total area of this British colony is just over two square miles. Once there was space for vineyards; now the wine comes from Spain and Gibraltar exports nothing but canned fish and fruit. Yet the armed services and the tourists ensure prosperity. I found a deep fascination in this bustling little colony and fell under its charm as most visitors do. Gibraltar with its red

telephone kiosks and pillar-boxes with royal insignia transplanted from England. Gibraltar, where the descendants of Jews expelled from Spain nearly five centuries ago still speak the ancient and almost forgotten language of Castile, their old home. Gibraltar with its resounding names, Bomb House Lane and Europa Road; its lovely names, Rosia Bay and Buena Vista; and now and again a mysterious name such as Ragged Staff Wharf that no one can explain. Gibraltar with its stately Alameda Gardens, a blend of English and Spanish; its date palms, eucalyptus and palmetto avenues. Gibraltar with its expected and unexpected relics, a bust of Queen Victoria here, the jawbone of a whale there. Gibraltar, where the two main walls of the battlemented Moorish castle form

part of the prison where the last man to be hanged was a Spanish *saboteur* during World War II. Gibraltar, almost an island, surrendered by Spain to Britain “to be held and enjoyed absolutely with all manner of right for ever without any exception or impediment whatsoever.”

Gibraltar, the walled town below the crouching lion, has known many changes and dramas. It saw the transition from Moorish mosque to Spanish cathedral; to the British flag that made the Rock a thorn in the heart of Spain. During one siege the British soldiers had to eke out their scanty rations with dandelions and wild onions, but they never surrendered. Half the population was wiped out by yellow fever early last century. In the bay five hundred

people drowned when an immigrant ship collided with a man-o'-war. Here, just before the World War I armistice a British battleship was torpedoed and went down with one thousand men. Shrapnel fell on the roof of the Rock Hotel during the Spanish civil war. During a strange and tragic interlude of World War II the French bombed Gibraltar; and at another period the Italians tried to bomb Gibraltar but hit their Spanish friends in La Linea by mistake. The Spanish see in the silhouette of the Rock a human corpse laid out in a shroud, and call the place El CueYpo. Certainly there has been much violence and sudden death in the shadow of the Rock.

Years ago the Spanish workmen had to leave Gibraltar when a sunset gun was fired. Spanish dance partners in

the cabarets were given until one in the morning; then they, too, had to hurry away like Cinderellas to La Linea. The story is told of a Frenchman who was shocked at losing a charming feminine companion in this way and remarked excitedly: "What a strange place is Gibraltar - they throw out the lovely girls and keep the monkeys!"

They are neither apes nor true monkeys but a tailless breed *Macaca Sylvana*, popularly known as Barbary apes. People from South Africa have mistaken them for baboons, for they are alike in many respects, especially in their outrageous behaviour. The apes of Gibraltar are mysterious creatures. On the Rock and elsewhere I tried to find answers to the old riddles. How did the apes reach the Rock? Is there

any truth in the legend that no one has ever found a dead ape? Do they bury their dead or carry them into a secret passage beneath the Straits linking Gibraltar with Africa?

Probably the apes came from Morocco, for the identical species flourishes on the rocky heights of Mount Meggu near Tetuan and elsewhere. Spanish soldiers used the apes as targets during the Riffian campaign of the nineteenth century. The troops noticed that the apes carried away their wounded, and this may be significant. Barbary apes are shaggy and powerful, with yellowish-brown coats and a mere tubercle instead of a tail. On the cheeks are brushed back whiskers. A full-grown male (four years old) is the size of an Airedale terrier. These apes prefer the ground to the trees. They feed very

much as baboons do and for centuries they were able to live on the sweet roots of the dwarf palm, insects, roots and other wild growths on the Rock. Now their foraging areas have been reduced and they might starve without their daily rations. The apes have aroused great interest because they are the only free primates in Europe. Before the days of Queen Elizabeth all the monkeys known to Europe were Barbary apes, and so the zoologists of medieval times thought that all monkeys were tailless. The beautiful tailed monkeys of West Africa came later. But there were apes of the Barbary species in Europe north of the Alps when prehistoric man lived there. They died out and man survived. Count Schlieffen bred a herd of sixty Gibraltar apes in

Germany during the eighteenth century but they were wiped out by rabies. Zeuner the zoologist said that the Spanish peninsula may have known the Barbary ape long ago, but deforestation and farmers drove the macaques to their last stronghold on the Rock. Carleton S. Coon, the American anthropologist, pointed out that bears and Barbary apes could hardly have swum the Straights of Gibraltar, but they might have walked round the coast from Palestine during a suitable climatic period.

It is clear that the apes go back a long way. Ayala, the eighteenth century Spanish historian, remarked: "But now let us speak of other and living productions which, in spite of the asperity of the Rock, still maintain themselves in the mountains. These are the monkeys, who may be called

the true owners, with possession from time immemorial, always tenacious of their dominion, living for the most part on the eastern side (marked on the maps as the 'Monkeys' Alameda') in high and inaccessible caverns. Neither the incursions of the Moors, the Spaniards nor the English, nor the cannon nor the bombs of either, have been able to dislodge them. They are active, cunning and sly and jealous of their ancient dwelling. They defend themselves against the ambitions of newcomers by frequently throwing stones at their working parties."

I found an old paper in the British Museum library which mentioned the great number of apes on the Rock more than two centuries ago, and added: "A poll-tax has been imposed on apes, Jews, Moors and other aliens." John Drinkwater, an English

writer of that period, declared: "The hill (of Gibraltar) is remarkable for the apes on the summit, not found in Spain. They breed in inaccessible places and appear in large droves with their young on their backs. It is imagined that they were brought by the Moors from Barbary." Another old writer named Montero appears to have been the first to deal with the mysteries of the apes. "Some of the apes are of extraordinary corpulence," Montero noted. "Rarely have skeletons or skins been found. Perhaps they are thrown into the sea after death or hidden in caverns only accessible to apes. Did they live here before the separation of the continents? Or were they introduced by the Arabs? The temperature and pasture of the Rock favour the species."

Fossilized bones of many animals have been found in the Gibraltar caves, but modern scientists have not identified the Barbary ape among them. Thus it is evident that the apes are comparative newcomers; they did not trek over the ancient land bridge with the elephants, rhinos, leopards and other African species. So both Zeuner and Coon are against the theory that the apes were brought to the Rock by the Arabs. Coon said the theory had no historical basis and Zeuner could see no reason why the Romans or the Moors should have transported the apes from Africa. I think Zeuner's doubts are easily answered. Barbary apes are intelligent and amusing, with a sense of humour; they are indeed among the cleverest of all animals. Soldiers must have had pets long ago and it was natural that

the Moorish invaders should have enjoyed the antics of the apes.

The subterranean tunnel theory is a wild guess, in my opinion. Such a tunnel may exist, but I refuse to believe that a band of apes could have found a way through the frightening darkness where human explorers have perished. St. Michael's Cave is regarded by the tunnel protagonists as the entrance to the long passage beneath the Strait. First of the victims were a Colonel Mitchell and a friend named Brett, who tried early last century to find the way to Apes' Hill opposite Gibraltar, the Mount Abyla which formed the second Pillar of Hercules in ancient times. They were never seen again. Captain Webber-Smith, an engineer officer, explored a number of passages out of St. Michael's Cave and found that all led

to a precipitous descent from the upper to a lower cave. "I am inclined to believe that it was in these passages that Colonel Mitchell and his friend lost themselves," Webber-Smith reported. At one remote spot he found the initials "A.B." cut into the rock. A later investigator found a rope dangling over a terrifying drop. The rope appeared to have been cut. Several expeditions have ventured down the precipice in recent years and have reached the grottoes and pools under St. Michael's Cave.

But the Rock has many other caves, each one with its legends. Judge's Cave at Europa Point, a refuge during the Great Siege, has been sealed up some way from the entrance because of its dangers. Genista, Leonora, Dead Marx's and Fig Tree are other famous caves. Human beings have perfected

climbing techniques with nylon ropes and pitons that a Barbary ape might well envy. I cannot imagine an ape knowing a route from Gibraltar to Africa when man has failed. No, the Moors must have brought the apes between the years 711 to 1462 from the Atlas mountains.

The mystery of the missing Barbary ape corpses is not so easily solved. Of course a few dead apes have been found from time to time. I saw the skull of a young female, shot with a sporting gun some years ago, in the Gibraltar museum. However, this is hardly a fair example. The museum curator assured me that he had never been able to secure a complete skeleton. He said that before World War I a ferocious ape annoyed an artillery officer who was drilling his men. A gunner struck a blow which

shattered the ape's skull but the body was not preserved. This was probably the last adult male in the small ape population of the period, so the governor sent to North Africa for apes to keep the colony going. A large ape was found dead in Europa Road about forty years ago, killed by eagles. Unfortunately this body was thrown away. So the search for skeletons goes on. A scientist at Bristol University asked for a specimen some years ago and the official reply stated: "Careful search has failed to trace the skeletons of any deceased Rock apes. It seems that they are buried by other apes deep in the Rock, and one day the sepulchre may be discovered."

Apes sometimes kill one another but the bodies vanish. At one time an old cannibal ape was suspected of preying on the young apes. But the apes are

secretive and they may well have their own secret graveyard unknown to the cave explorers. Many old Gibraltarians will tell you that a remnant of the original ape colony survives to this day in a secluded "pleasure garden" high up on the Rock; and that no fresh blood has ever reached this hidden pack. They do not fraternise with newcomers. Few people have ever set eyes on them. It is a romantic idea and it sounds fantastic; yet it has been supported by such an authority as Sir Claud Russell, K.C.M.G. of the Fauna Preservation Society.

In far off days when Gibraltar was covered by thick forest the apes shared the Rock with wolves and wild boars, porcupines and badgers. Food was plentiful and the apes grew fat on their diet of wild olives and prickly pears, acorns and blackberries. They still turn

over the stones in search of insects but wild growths no longer cover the Rock and the packs cannot support themselves. When man invaded their old hunting grounds the apes lost their nuts and berries and so they were forced to raid the gardens and the town. This was the opening of a long war and many an ape was shot. Food shortages caused fights among the hungry packs and the apes killed one another. But the boldest apes carried out their sorties with such cunning that they often returned to the heights with bulging stomachs. No house or home was sacred. The apes cleared the governor's table one night before a banquet, and they stole the humble rations of soldiers from the barracks. Sometimes an officer giving a dinner party would find that the apes had plundered the dining-room while his

guests were drinking their sherry in the next room. Apes have even boarded men-o'-war in the dockyard in search of loot.

Again and again the apes of Gibraltar were sentenced to death. The legend that Britain would lose the Rock when the last ape died was ignored. Yet no one ever succeeded in exterminating the apes. They realised the danger and retreated to fastnesses unknown to man. Gibraltar has always been in two minds about the apes. When the packs dwindled to vanishing point someone has always sent to North Africa for more apes. About a century ago there were only three apes left; but fresh blood soon restored the pack to the point where it became a menace.

Eighty years ago the senior naval officer complained that the apes were stealing fruit, tearing stones from the

walls, breaking wooden railings and roof gutters. A colonel of engineers declared that apes had attacked his children, eaten all his fruit, dug up his potatoes, stolen his trousers and slept in his bed. I read the official record of a young male that had been driven out of the pack by the old leader. The ill-mannered young ape attacked a little girl, snatched off her hat and pulled her hair. The girl drove the ape off and later identified her assailant. According to the report, which appeared to have been written in all seriousness, a sergeant brought the guilty ape before Sir Archibald Hunter, the governor. The little girl was there to give evidence and when the ape saw her it hung its head and appeared to be ashamed. The sentence was ten days imprisonment in a cage and the record stated that other apes fed the prisoner

through the bars. I think the apes have always had friends among the Gibraltarians and there are people who like to look upon the apes as fellow citizens of the Rock.

Just before World War I a humane official organised the first feeding scheme for the Gibraltar apes. An officer of the Gibraltar Regiment was later appointed "O/C Apes" and each ape received daily rations of Jerusalem artichokes and spring onions. When they came "on the strength" the apes were also given names; the sort of names humorous soldiers would choose. Thus you will find Betty and Phyllis in the records, Jubilee and Titch, Nicky and Penny, Winston, Julian and Maureen. A celebrated pack leader after World War II was Gunner, with his two-inch tusks. Gunner

disappeared at last and his name was crossed off the roll of apes.

Everyone who has lived in Gibraltar for years has an ape story. An officer's wife assured me that one evening while she was brushing her hair she became aware of an ape seated behind her, watching intently. The apes have pelted householders with figs and have taken cover behind chimneypots when hunted with stones and catapults. An old fig tree in the garden of the Moorish Castle is robbed every year by the apes when the juicy buds appear. Sir Bartle Frere, chief justice of the colony, was among the victims of the apes. Not long after World War I his home was raided and furniture wrecked. He suggested that the apes should either be exterminated, deported to Morocco, reduced to a small pack of one sex or kept in cages. As a

result, the governor ordered all but ten of the apes to be shot. The pack dwindled to three in 1924, ape-lovers became alarmed, and a later governor ordered the reinforcement of the apes. Churchill's famous order regarding the apes during World War II was the last of a number of similar importations. Nazi agents were suspected of killing the apes at that period but I was informed that several apes had been smuggled away by American seamen. Strange tales are told of the Gibraltar apes, and the strangest tales are true.

Nowadays the apes of Gibraltar are as safe as the storks in Holland or the ibis in Egypt. Births and deaths in the ape packs have been recorded by the "Gibraltar Chronicle" for many years. You can see Gibraltar apes in zoos as far away as London and Washington. After centuries of persecution the apes

remain the lords of the Rock, sun-bathing unafraid on the ancient walls and gateways like the humans on the beaches. Most of them are tame, but some become aggressive when annoyed. It is as well to allow an ape pickpocket to operate undisturbed. A friendly ape will settle on your shoulder and start a rather difficult conversation. Daily rations still include artichokes and onions, with the addition of nuts, radishes, bananas, cabbages and lettuce. My taxi-driver said that the apes were living better than some of the people in the town. However, the feeding has ended the raids on the town and the apes are protected by law.

Expeditions still enter the Rock in search of the skeletons of apes that have vanished. Men still hope to find the apes' tunnel. I love Gibraltar with

its old streets and its strange population, but never 'will you find me in the fearsome depths where Mitchell and Brett climbed down to death. I prefer the Gibraltar of the cool Rock Hotel with its swimming pool and English breakfast; the Gibraltar of duty-free shops; the streets where a Gibraltarian looks out of his cellar window into the attic of the next house on the hillside. It is a charming town, a happy town. "Halt! Who does there?" "The Keys." I felt that I had those keys for a few days. I would like to enter the Land-port Gate once more.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

COUS-COUS AND COBRAS

I STEAMED out of Gibraltar harbour in a ferry which aroused a faint reminiscent feeling. Surely Alec Guinness should be on the bridge waving farewell to his fond wife, yet looking forward to meeting his vivacious girl friend in Tangier? The little Bland Line *Mons Calpe* was crowded on that brilliant golden morning with her nine hundred passengers and eighty cars. Well, it was a run of only two hours. Sometimes there are violent storms in the Strait of Gibraltar; strong currents and low fog may make the short crossing difficult for mariners of even greater cunning than an Alec Guinness. However, I had a good Spanish lunch under the Red Ensign; melon, chicken and bold sausages decked out with tomatoes and saffron

rice, broad beans and mushrooms, the soft cheese called *queso gallego* and a small carafe of red wine. Far too much for lunch, of course, but I eat more when I am travelling and do not suffer for it. I paid in Moroccan *dirhams*, pronounced rather like the Afrikaans word *derms*. Then the *Mons Calpe* entered the magnificent old harbour round which Tangier rises in an amphitheatre and rests on its hills. I knew at once that I would like this white city of beaches and fragrant gardens, coloured tiles, palms and eucalyptus trees, cypress and pine.

Soon I was in my expensive bedroom at the five-star hotel called El Minzah, a famous place of great comfort but without a lift. When I stepped out into the centre of the town to get my bearings I was reminded immediately of the works of those eager authors

who have described Tangier as a city of sin and mystery, headquarters of international crooks and smugglers, refugees and spies. My guide book advised me that "Tangier is not prudish or gossipy." I was accosted by an elderly Tangerine wearing the hooded *djellabah* robe which enabled him to speak with a conspiratorial air. The offer he made convinced me that all I had read of Tangier was true. However, I am more interested in streets and markets, restaurants, snake-charmers, honest tricksters and entertainers than in pimps and their willing accomplices. I told the Tangerine it was too early for such unusual pleasures as he had promised and I left him shaking his head in complete disagreement. The sort of girls he had in mind were so respectable that they were not allowed out after dark.

"Night club girls no good," declared the Tangerine in tones of horror. "My girls *family* girls, sweet young girls, thirteen, fourteen." No doubt he was doing a roaring trade without police interference. "Tangier is not prudish or gossipy."

In the dining-room at the El Minzah I was captivated by the skill of a type of craftsman I had never seen before. He stood at a large table in the middle of the room, a powerful Moroccan in golden turban and white raiment. *His batterie de cuisine* consisted of food mills, graters, knives plain and serrated, filleting knives, peelers and choppers. He was surrounded by as choice an array of raw and cooked foods as I have ever set eyes upon; lobsters and prawns and many Mediterranean fish; all the vegetables and fruits from globe artichokes to red

and green peppers, avocados and the long-leaved lettuces favoured by the Arab races. Morocco likes raw vegetables. When a salad was ordered this wizard of the dining-room went into action like a man possessed. So fast did he work that you saw a transformation worthy of a conjurer. Cucumbers were sliced in a trice, tomatoes become jewels, radishes blossomed like roses, beetroots were swiftly diced, onions fell into fairy rings as the razor-edged knife rose and dropped. With a loud crack a huge lobster would fall apart and be presented on a dish garnished with fresh gems from the wizard's collection. Fruit became not just fruit salads but still-life masterpieces. I watched him reverently but when the head waiter came to my table I ordered cous-cous, the national dish of

Morocco, but not so common as the other Moroccan favourite, the skewered *shish kebab*. Cous-cous is a wheaten semolina, very filling, and the peasant eats this with a few scraps of meat or vegetables. At El Minzah it was a noble dish with mutton and chicken, butter, almonds, saffron, raisins and carrots, onions and cabbage, and the mixture of herbs and spices called *lekama*.

Lekama flavours so many dishes and is on sale by so many barrow boys that it must be listed as one of Tangier's most typical aromas. It is compounded of ginger, black pepper and saffron with cinnamon, cloves and nutmeg; so a *lekama* blender cannot hide his presence. Orange blossom is another Tangier fragrance. It is made on the spot and many bakers mix it into their bread. One cannot and would not wish

to escape from the universal cooking odour of *shish kebab*, the skewered chunks of lamb, onions, tomatoes and green peppers which are roasted over charcoal in almost every Tangier street. Tons of mint are cut every morning for millions of glasses of the hot, sweet, milkless mint tea of the people; so this, too, creates a pleasant atmosphere. You are unlikely to sniff roast pork in Tangier but you will not escape the rank-smelling white *smin* butter made from camel's milk. Fire and steam are the favourite Moroccan cooking methods. Everywhere there are gridiron and woodsmoke odours; everything is there from hot liver to roasting chestnuts.

You smell camels rather too often in Tangier but as a happy contrast there are the flower stalls in the markets and the secret gardens with their singing

birds and fountains, lemon trees and pungent lilies, rose bushes and bougainvillea. Here are arcaded courtyards tiled with delicate green mosaics, gorgeous hand-woven rugs, divans, soft Moorish leather cushions tooled in brilliant gold and red. If you can leave Morocco without a gay leather folder or a pair of the slippers called *babouches* you are strong indeed. In the *souks*, the narrow streets which are often trellised against the sun and covered with raffia, you find the soul of Tangier. Here are Old Testament characters selling dried lizard skins and the medicines of a thousand years ago. Potters and weavers, dyers and brass-workers ply their trades and offer their wares. I saw olive oil coming from stone presses. People carried flat loaves, the bread I had last tasted in Egypt two decades

before. Shopkeepers beseeched me to buy swords and scimitars, live chickens, carpets, barbaric jewellery.

In these *souks* some magician seemed to have brought the Arabian Nights into the twentieth century. I passed Indian curio shops and saw a man trying to dispose of a live gazelle. I could easily imagine Tangier as a Phoenician settlement and a Roman outpost; but there was never a sign of the abandoned British colony of three centuries ago. Within living memory rebels hung in cages from the walls of Tangier and they were released only to be flung to the lions.

Cape Spartel, the north-west point of Africa, one of the great capes of the world, is only eight miles out of Tangier. I drove there with my guide Serfati and found myself thinking of Agulhas five thousand miles away and

other dramatic landfalls and turning points on the sea lanes of the globe. Cape Spartel has the most beautiful lighthouse I have ever seen, set among gardens with streams and date palms. Serfati said the ocean currents met there (as they do at Cape Point) the “east and west water”. Wild boars were encountered there not so long ago, went on the guide, but now there were only the wild flowers and purple heather. Then he led me to the caves of Hercules and the Roman ruins. I walked for a while on a long beach and wished that I could walk the whole distance southwards to Table Bay; a walk that would be filled with adventure; but an impossible walk for me, too far and too hot.

Serfati took me through streets of geraniums and prickly pear to the heights where the Kasbah stands on a

quiet old square. He pointed out the Bastinado Gate where criminals were beaten on the soles of the feet. This was once the seat of government; the sultan's palace, the treasury, the prison, the mosque. I saw many races mingling there: Jews, Moors and Berbers. Serfati taught me to identify them. Many of the Jews wore black skull-caps. Moors were tall and good-looking; they wore long gowns and they liked to ride. Berbers were whiter than the others, with high cheekbones; some were very fair and hazel-eyed. They came into Tangier with long donkey caravans bringing the food they had grown. They are the original Moroccans and it is probable that the mysterious extinct Guanche people of the Canary Islands were Berbers. I also gazed with interest on a group of Ouled Nail women, for

Serfati swore they were irresistible. They had a love philtre which would enslave any man, so that he would spend all his money on a certain girl. (Clearly the honest Serfati was not trying to sell something, like the man I had met earlier.) Yes, the Ouled Nail women were clever dancers, but it was the love philtre which made them wealthy. What was in the philtre? Serfati said it tasted like mint tea but that obviously something was added. I told him we would not be visiting the Ouled Nails for our afternoon tea and he agreed.

I can recall the sounds of Tangier as easily as the aromas. Moroccan musicians play the flute and drum and the crude gimbri violin. Voices come from a schoolroom, little girls chanting their lessons. Water-carriers with fat, brasstapped goatskins clank

brass goblets to remind customers of their thirst. *Balek!* You move aside as a laden donkey taps over the cobbles. Old men with flowing beards sit over their coffee in tiny cafes; and here the clinking dominoes break the silence. From the Zocco de Fuera, the open-air market, comes the evil chuckling of parakeets. You will surely hear the muezzins announcing the hours of prayer from the minarets. It is impossible to predict the scene and the sounds round the next corner; there may be a soft, invisible orchestra or the pounding of tom-toms. When you hear the gourd flute and the “monkey drum” there must be a snakecharmer giving his performance.

Snakecharmers are prominent in Tangier, though they give their strange entertainment right across the northern shores of Africa to Suez. At the

Kasbah I watched an American tourist attempting to photograph his wife with two cobras round her neck. She kept moving nervously with such an expression of horror that the portrait must have caused some discussion later, if indeed it was successful. The snakecharmer kept a firm grip on both the heads of the cobras but this did not appear to satisfy the lady. “I don’t like the feel of them next to my skin,” she complained. Her husband went on focussing and clicking.

Of course it is the natural horror of snakes that draws the crowd round the snakecharmer. Serfati took me to the Grande Zocco market, saying we would find the best snakecharmers there. Sure enough there was a member of the Aissawa brotherhood, a religious sect with long oily hair. The man allowed a cobra to sink its fangs

into his tongue and hand there, a most repulsive feat. "If you like to pay for a live fowl the cobra will kill it in a moment with its poison," Serfati suggested. I turned down this particular treat. Serfati informed me that the Aissawa members were immune not only to snake venom but to pain. They stabbed themselves in the head with daggers, slit their mouths from ear to ear. This, too, could be arranged. However, I moved on to watch an Arab who appeared to be putting a large scorpion to sleep. At first the scorpion menaced him with the sting in its tail; then it lay still as the Arab stroked it. A trusting spectator stretched out his hand and the Arab placed the scorpion on the palm. It lay there motionless. Finally the Arab took the fearsome insect back and revived it. I gave him a coin, watching the lively

scorpion carefully as I passed him the money.

Serfati wanted to show me a fight between a lizard and a horned viper but these traditional enemies were not to be found in the Grande Zocco that day. I gathered that the lizard was nearly always the victor as it had no blood circulation to carry the deadly poison round its system. Vipers, I gathered, are handled only by the most experienced snakecharmers. They are much faster than the gentle and docile cobra, for vipers strike unexpectedly like a whiplash. In spite of many explanations the relationship between the snake and its master is still very largely a mystery. Snakes are said to be deaf but Serfati was firm in his belief that they could be called out of their holes by the droning, plaintive music of the charmer's gourd flute.

This is a primitive affair, something that started thousands of years ago. The music has a deep, mesmeric quality. Only those who have been reared close to Nature in the deserts of India and North Africa can hope to lure and train a snake. It is a fascinating affair. As I stared at the cobras in the Grande Zocco I remembered a summing-up by John Lockwood Kipling and decided to find and quote it. Here are the very words of Rudyard Kipling's father: "He is the necklace of the gods, he can give gems to the poor, he is the guardian of priceless treasures, he can change himself into manifold forms, he casts his skin annually and thus has the gift of youth. He is of high caste, in the confidence of gods and demons. When the great world was made he was already there."

At times the snakecharmer moves like a dancer, holding the cobra's head close to his face, whispering to it while the quivering tongue threatens his eyes and mouth. Then he teases the snake deliberately so that even the tamest cobra strikes out again and again. Some of these men will allow a snake to cling to eyelids and lips. They will bite off a snake's head and then take lumps of red-hot charcoal as though to cauterise their mouths. This is indeed a dark art. The snakecharmer is one of those nomads who comes in with the dawn and goes out with the sunset and no man can describe his origin or the true source of his weird knowledge. There are times when the snakecharmer takes the onlooker so far back into the past that he may almost believe in oriental magic.

Among the snakecharmers and fakirs, beggars and musicians of the Grande Zocco were those intriguing entertainers, the professional story tellers. Moroccans love to hear the bygone glories of their land related by true artists and I am glad to say that a gifted storyteller is regarded as one of the stars of the market place. As he goes on his rounds of the country people look forward to his arrival. A small arena is set apart for these great narrators in the Grande Zocco, the square which is said to offer all the sights and sounds and odours of the Arab world. Word reaches the *souks* that Achmed Ali has returned, a man who puts such feeling into a tale that every man, woman and child is held spellbound. The arena is packed at every session. Achmed Ali turned out to be a man in the prime of life with

the expressive face and gestures of an actor. Dressed in snowy white, he held a small tambourine and tapped it at dramatic moments. What was this old story? All eyes were fixed on Achmed Ali's face as he approached the climax for the thousandth time. "This man appeals only to Arabs," remarked Serfati. "No white man could possibly understand such a story."

Marabouts tell fortunes in the Grand Zocco, tracing designs in sand as they peer into the future. You may see an African version of the William Tell legend, an orange shot neatly off a boy's head by a marksman with a medieval cross-bow. Buffoons raise a laugh as they make faces at performing monkeys. Tumblers dressed in blue turn somersaults in a ring of spectators while other acrobats perform circus tricks with ladders and

hoops. A boy contortionist ties himself into knots and a fire-eater blows out flames. Everyone admires the swordsman who engages two opponents at the same time and sends their swords spinning out of their hands. Falconers dispatch swift Barbary falcons from wrist to sky. Dervishes, more repulsive than the snake-eaters, force out their eyes on skewers and burn their hands with hot irons. It came almost as a relief when they thrust sharp needles through their cheeks and gobbled up prickly pear leaves. "It is done with the aid of a drug like incense," Serfati remarked. "These men are descendants of a tribe of holy men who perished in the desert long ago. Only those who could eat anything survived the ordeal. People call them Pyslii. They can eat and nourish themselves on beetles and dry leaves. Pay them a fee and they

will beat their drums in such a way as to cast out devils." Now I felt that I had ventured far enough into the unknown and I watched a band of conjurers. Most of the tricks were variations of the civilised rabbit and tophat type of entertainment. Flowers, vegetables and a dormouse were discovered in the sleeves of people in the crowd. But there was one original trick. A conjurer threw a small wooden object of peculiar shape high above his head and caught it. He threw it again into the sun and this time it disappeared. (I think it was a sort of Moroccan boomerang which set off on an unexpected course if you knew how to handle it.) Then the conjurer pointed to a man in the audience and shouted: "He has it." Yes, the man had the queerly-shaped wooden missile in his hood. Or a replica.

Harbours should be approached from the sea, but when I left Tangier for my next harbour Oran I embarked on a peculiar overland journey. First there was the run to Sidi Kacem in the stream-lined, air-conditioned Casablanca train with its large windows; a luxurious Diesel run with lunch at a buffet counter. They gave me a Moroccan meat and raisin pastry and a glass of wine and I was satisfied. But when I changed at Sidi Kacem a slow old wooden train awaited me and I thought wistfully of the Casablanca rapide. Night fell and my morale was not raised by the moaning of an American school marm in my compartment. She had been given short change on the Casablanca train and did not realise that nothing could be done about it. There was no bar and no escape until I alighted at Fez.

Fez put me in a better mood. I had booked at the Hotel Palais Jamai, just outside the main gateway to the huge walled city. To my surprise I found it was indeed a palace. Here the brothers Jamai, aristocrats of Fez, lived in the eighteenth century and gave their oriental entertainments. The old part has been carefully preserved; gilded ceilings of carved cedar, walls covered with Arab verses, lanterns and chandeliers and trellises of beautiful wrought iron. Halls are filled with carpets and divans. From the upper terrace you look out over the whole of Fez, that splendid oasis of olives and palms, domes and minarets, crenellated walls and turreted gateways. A river passes through Fez, under the houses and streets; so that only here and there are you aware of it turning water-wheels

HARBOURS OF MEMORY



"Of course it is the natural horror of snakes that draws the crowd round the snakecharmer. Serfati took me to the Grande Zocco market, saying we would find the best snakecharmers there".

and feeding the many fountains. One of Morocco's famous poets declared that the loveliest flowers, the finest fruit in the world, grew in Fez. Perhaps that is why I remember the terraced Palais Jamai gardens. Apricots and roses were there, African lotus, Seville oranges, geraniums and daturas. The scents came into my bathroom. I put on a luxurious white towelling-gown provided by the hotel and knew that I would be sorry to leave this palace.

Dinner that night confirmed the happy feeling. They gave me the celebrated Herrira soup with dates, a complicated mutton and chicken giblet soup blended with a great variety of vegetables and eggs. There was a ham omelette in the French tradition; then lamb and peas, grapes and pears. Following my custom I drank the dry

red wine of Fez and found it very much to my taste. That night I went to sleep to the sound of water running in a garden furrow. When I hear that lullaby, or the sea, I cannot stay awake long.

I saw Fez, and bought a leather book cover of gorgeous red and gold, and then set out unwisely in a native bus for Oujda on the Algerian frontier. I will pass over the eight hours in the bus, my burning thirst, the dreadful wayside cafes. At one halt I had to order a revolting bottled banana drink that made me thirstier than before. Oujda is a massive place a thousand years old on the old caravan route to Fez. I was glad to join the train there for Oran. It was an Algerian train. Soon after it pulled out of Oujda I entered for the first time in my life (and probably the last) the "one man

dining-car." Accustomed as I was to teams of chefs and stewards it came almost as a shock. Nevertheless this one man, Jacques, proved to me that one dedicated craftsman can do as much as a corps of careless servants. The buffet car had six tables, a counter and a kitchen. I noticed a refrigerator, oven grill and hotplates and a boiler and sink unit in the kitchen. There were store cupboards and a wine and bottle cabinet and litter bins. On the counter I noted a coffee machine and glass showcase displaying Algerian cakes and pies. I asked Jacques to suggest a lunch dish and he pointed to a tariff board with a set menu. Wine? He brought out a half litre of Mascara, which I had thought of foolishly as an eyeshade, not an Algerian red wine. Jacques opened it placed a luscious tray of *hors*

d'oeuvre before me and the meal had begun.

Other passengers sauntered in and were served with coffee at the counter or a savoury mutton stew at the tables. Jacques also sold bars of chocolate and baskets of fruit. Those who ordered beer or *aperitifs* were supplied without delay. Through the window I saw Tlemcen appearing on its flat hill; an old trading station with blossoming orchards between the Sahara and the sea; a place of enormous olive and pistachio trees. By now I had finished my olives and tunny fish, anchovies and saucisson. Jacques looked out of the corner of his eye, put a steak on the griller, handed a mother a bottle of milk, poured three cordials and a dry Vermouth, and set the steak, potatoes and a delicious green salad before

me. He never had a second to spare but he always smiled and one knew he would make no mistakes. I loved his dining car. As a child I liked the idea of meals on railway wheels and found unusual enjoyment in going right through an unexpectedly long menu while the panorama of countryside passed the window. This magic has never faded. I looked out upon the Atlas mountains, the white domes marking the tombs of saints, vine-clad valleys, gorges with waterfalls. Jacques brought me a superb camembert, whipped back into the galley, beat up eggs and made omelettes for the two critical French girls, and played with steam and hot water taps, ice and ice-cream with expert hands. I saw towns on old Roman sites, orange gardens and lemon groves. Jacques put down a

fruit plate and a cool pear full of flavour. I had been reading an old Baedeker on this country. "Few travellers venture inland as they must carry tents, drinking water and insect powder," Baedeker reported. Those days are over. Jacques will look after you. He made fresh coffee for me and I gave him a tip worthy of his supreme skill.

That afternoon I set eyes on a place of youthful dreams, Sidi-Bel-Abbes. Not that I ever hankered after a life in the French Foreign Legion; but I had longed to visit the cradle of the Legion, this town built by the Legion and held by these desperate men against the Arab fanatics. Now here was Sidi-Bel-Abbes among its fig trees and aloe hedges, the hot afternoon redolent with jasmine and the African earth. And these thousands of

men, German and negro, unfrocked priest and pickpocket, these ruthless soldiers with their secrets? They had gone a year before, the last detachment. They had burned their sacred flag and marched out with their memories along the great boulevards for the last time. Well, I had met them in the Western Desert in wartime and in peaceful Marseilles. But to have seen the exiles on their parade ground in Sidi-Be1Abbes; that would have been a moment.

What more is there to tell? The train passed out of Algeria's granary into a wide plain with a salt lake. In the evening I came to Oran and my hotel. It was the Hotel Terminus, on the railway platform. That night after dinner I sauntered out and inspected the station; another of my customs which I have observed without fail

from Bergen to Buenos Aires. The lights were on in a small dining-car. Peering through the window I observed the untiring Jacques stocking his cupboards for another journey. Yes, the "one man dining-car" had not gone to his well-deserved rest. He was passing out empty bottles, taking in baskets of fruit and vegetables, filling his larder for the run to Oujda next day. I remembered my grilled steak and Mascara gratefully and saluted Jacques in the darkness.

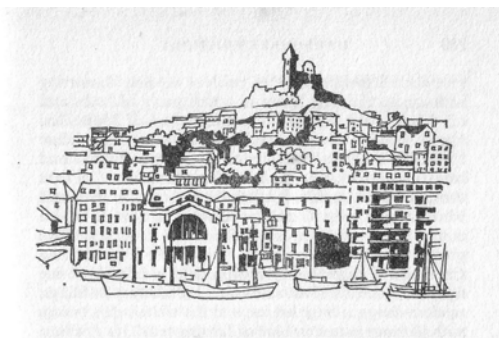
Oran is not one of my harbours of romance. The setting is impressive, a crescent bay with hills rising to fifteen hundred feet; a modern city of glass and balconies with something American about the well-planned traffic routes, with France in the shops and restaurants and with the Arabs triumphant. A city of Saharan siroccos

and winter snows. On the wharves you may see everything from almonds to the green marrows called *zucchini*s. Also enormous containers of drinkable carafe wines.

The dogs kept me awake every night in Oran and so I was not sorry to board a little *Compagnie Generale Transatlantique paquebot* called *Ville d'Alger* for Marseilles. It looked as though most of the French troops were leaving with me. Fine young men, most of them, wearing the ribbon of a lost campaign. Among the soldiers and the other passengers were faces typical of almost every part of France's former colonies; the little Tonkinese, the hulking negroes of Martinique, all the Africans, and the unhappy pided noirs, white refugees from Algeria, facing an uncertain future in France.

I had travelled under the tricolour before, so that I was not surprised to find the bar open at seven in the morning serving black coffee and beer. Down on the foredeck young sergeant-pilots were eating their long ham rolls while a party of Moslems opened a water-melon. In the smoking room the gambling never ceased. I recall the officers with row upon row of ribbons; children with dark faces and red hair; a man with a pet chameleon that climbed over his cheeks. At lunch that day there was an entree called *ramequins au fromage* that blended perfectly with the *vin rouge superieur*. When shall I taste such *ramequins* again? I had a cabin with red silk walls decorated with girls from the French West Indies, a Josephine Baker theme. And so I came to Marseilles next day

with happier expectations than many of my fellow passengers on board the crowded *Ville d'Alger*.



CHAPTER NINETEEN GATEWAY TO AFRICA

THIS IS La Canebière, main street of Marseilles, the oldest street in France. La Canebière, one of the great streets of the world and one that has known great personalities before and after Napoleon. When the exiled President Kruger drove up from the harbour this street resounded with cries of “*Mort aux Anglais!*” It has heard the bag-

pipes of kilted regiments with “*Zuid Afrika*” on their shoulder-straps; it has echoed to the drums of the Foreign Legion. Loud and clear down the years comes the anthem that was born here, the victorious Marseillaise, the battle hymn of France.

La Canebière smells mainly of the sea, for it leads into the legendary Vieux Port, the old harbour. But there is usually a touch of saffron and the aroma of crushed garlic in the air as scores of chefs prepare the local *bouillabaise*, that artful symphony of the kitchen; the great *Zangouste*, crabs and oysters, fanged *rascasse*, fat red mullet, eels and mussels; all these and other luscious morsels simmering with onions and bay leaves in a rich gravy of herbs and oil. Marius, the typical humorous citizen of Marseilles, knows how to live. Paris is

perfumed and feminine. Marseilles is a man's city, redolent with baked snails and roasted chestnuts, *brioches* fresh from the bakers, all shot through with the rich and satisfying tang of a thousand wine casks. In the Canebière the hot breath of Africa comes up to meet the softer odours of pines and olive groves and the blossoms of the terraced Riviera fields. La Canebière is short, barely two-thirds of a mile, but wide and handsome; lined with tall nineteenth century buildings, modern shops, a huge bourse and the white cafe awnings with glorious names in blue or flaming red. This fine lane was once a rope walk where the hemp merchants had their shops; and the craftsmen who rigged the old Mediterranean sailing ships gave La Canebière its name. They grew the

hemp and made the rope. Yes, it is short, but the street runs out through the Vieux Port to Africa and the world.

Marius does not dominate La Canebière. He shares it with blanket-ed Arabs and their veiled women, Moroccan Jews, yellow Annamites in dark blue, Chinese, Tonkinese, Malgaches; singing Italians with. Accordions and brown children, gypsy women in bright garments, Malayans and Greeks, negroes from Africa and the Americas, other black men from Martinique, bereted Catalans, boisterous English seamen on shore for a spree, Corsicans and Levantines, a human kaleidoscope. The sing-song Provencal *patois* rises above an unpredictable murmur of many tongues. Some of the foreigners are at home in Marseilles

for there are colonies of Italians and Greeks, Turks and White Russians and even Swiss. La Canebière also provides a horde of international quacks and fortune tellers with a living. You can find faith-healers and phrenologists, the sort of blatant swindlers Barnum loved. All this flood of humanity gives La Canebière unusual animation and a seat on the *terrasse* of a cafe provides a lot for the price of your *café-filtre* or Dubonnet.

In the Canebière you may be scorched by the sun at one moment and then frozen suddenly by the cold blast of the mistral, that notorious wind sweeping down the Rhone valley with the force of a hurricane. The mistral is the south-easter of Marseilles and Marius pretends to be fond of it in his whimsical way. Make no mistake, it is one

of Europe's accursed winds. Like the south-easter it comes out of a clear sky and it can knock you down on the pavement. It blows for half the year, mainly in winter and spring. The name is really *magistral*, the masterly wind that strikes Marseilles like the breath of an iceberg and churns up the sea to white and dark blue. Van Gogh waited for the mistral and painted a seascape that was a masterpiece. No doubt it filled his teeth and eyes with dust as it whistled round his canvas but he saw the beauty just as the lover of Cape Town understands the majesty of the roaring black south-easter. People blame the mistral for all sorts of queer behaviour. It was probably the mistral that acted as the trigger factor when Van Gogh cut off his ear and entered a lunatic asylum. One man shot a taxi-driver who had kept him waiting and

pleaded that the mistral had made him nervous. Clearly the Cape southeaster is not such a bad wind after all. Yet they say in Marseilles: "The sunshine and the mistral set everything in order." Evidently it is their "Cape Doctor".

Marseilles has been called by a poet a triumphant blast of music, light and colour, queen of the Mediterranean, gateway to Africa and the world. Undoubtedly it is rabelaisian and bawdy and it has been denounced as the great whore of Europe, a sailor's honky-tonk harbour, a city of *souteneurs* and harlots, the toughest city west of Suez. It began as a Phoenician trading station because of the natural harbour; and this sixty-acre creek served the town well for twenty centuries. Roman colonists called the place Massalia. Explorers sailed away

from Massalia to chart the coasts of Britain and West Africa. Greek coins of the early days are still found in the city. Roman relics have also come to light for the slum overlooking the old harbour was Massalia, and here a temple of Diana and Ephesus was revealed, Greek statuettes and a Greek amphitheatre.

Caesar besieged Marseilles. Goths and Saracens and Normans attacked the harbour. When the plague from Barbary struck the town in a sweltering June early in the eighteenth century thousands fled, one hundred thousand died; and the survivors had only herbs to burn as disinfectants. Marseilles knew the guillotine. It has always been a city of violence, one murder a day at some periods; and the murderers seem to prefer broad daylight. No one was greatly sur-

prised when King Alexander of Jugo-Slavia was assassinated there. Newsreel cameramen were ready for it, judging by results. All France chuckled when a gangster shot a rival at a fireworks display; it was so delicious, such a typical Marseilles crime. Italians and Corsican bandits are among the worst criminals. Some of the gangsters who emigrated to Chicago and flourished there were from the Marseilles university of crime. Once the organised gangs of thugs succeeded in raiding the central police station and destroying the finger-prints and criminal records; they wiped the slate clean and embarked on fresh careers. Here, too, a gang held up the wife of the multi-millionaire Aga Khan with a wooden pistol, another episode so much in keeping with the Marseilles

atmosphere that even the judge had to laugh.

Near the Vieux Port, behind the old town hall, lay the worst slum in the world. It was blown up by the Nazis in 1943, not because of the red-light district there, but owing to the resistance movement making good use of the underground passages and hiding-places of the hideous maze. The people were given twenty-four hours to leave and the sudden decision caused great suffering among the innocent poor. About a thousand daughters of joy moved over to the opera area and remained in business. Twentyfour thousand other inhabitants went to the concentration camps. Marseilles was heavily shelled by the Germans, but with the end of World War II came happier days. Protection racketeers

have been defeated at last and rival gangsters no longer fight it out in the shuddering alleyways of the Vieux Port labyrinth. The rest of France still regards Marius as a dubious character supporting backward municipal rulers. (The drains are not beyond reproach.) At best, Marius is looked upon as a *blagueur*, a voluble clown with an unprintable record of eccentricity. He goes about his affairs with lazy nonchalance, frivolous and disreputable.

Marius does not care. If the climate had been hotter, Marseilles might have become a lazy Naples. As things are Marius saunters out and does good business. Marseilles is handsome and prosperous. Twenty thousand ships are loaded and unloaded every year in the way shipowners admire, and two million passengers land or embark

there. "Our city shines resplendent in its great affairs," runs the civic motto. Marseilles still has its drug traffickers, its scandals; but the wickedness is only an inevitable part of the pulsating seaport. A strange, raffish vitality rises above the long record of villainy, devastating fires and other disasters.

After viewing the Marseilles kaleidoscope of life you may find it restful to visit the Musee des Beaux Arts in the Palais Longchamp. The guide books which are inclined to sneer at Marseilles should pay more attention to this gallery, one of the richest in France. Here are tapestries and furniture, paintings by Corot and Millet and enormous murals by Pierre Puget, greatest of the Provencal artists. In the natural history museum next door I set eyes on the last wolf shot in

the Pyrenees, a valuable addition to my mental collection of rarities.

Every thoroughfare in Marseilles seems to make for the harbour. You realise this to the full when you drive up the steep hill to that great landmark for seamen, Notre Dame de la Garde. This none too lovely cathedral stands poised over the city with its huge gilded statue of the Virgin on the tall belfry. The city at your feet is a jumble, a haphazard network, but it has a purpose - the descent from the hills to the life-blood of the sea. From here you will see the soft cream and grey houses rising in terraces from the old harbour; the packed streets and flights of steps; the villas and gardens of the rich on pine-clad Roncas Blane hill; avenues lined with sycamores; the vegetable gardens of the ordinary Marius and his wife (or girl friend)

Olive, beyond the city limits. Away to the east runs the Corniche road that has carried the beat of history. Cutting into La Canebière is the Cours Belsunce, with its plane trees like umbrellas, a true street of the Midi; and the Prado, that beautiful avenue leading to the seafront and the bathing cabins. You may pick out the Rue Saint-Ferreol, a street of luxurious shops and the more expensive pastry-cooks; from here, too, you will see the remnant of the Vieux Port slum which escaped destruction, the cobbled, squalid passageways between the dark and ancient houses.

Marseilles is a city of strange names. Translate the street names and you taste the flavour of Marseilles; the Boulevard of the Black Sausage Maker, Street of the Rolling Stone, Octopus Lane, Champagne Avenue,

Street of the Green Carpet, King of Spades Street, Question Mark Avenue. There is also a Rue Paradis where they point out the former Gestapo headquarters.

Observe the motor-launches called *vedettes* loaded with trippers and making for the white limestone islands outside the harbour. “Départs Accélérés! Retours Assurés.” That is just as well, for who would desire to remain on the Chateau d’If, that fort and prison with its legends of the Count of Monte Cristo and the “man in the iron mask.” Far away to the west lies the Camargue, the glistening salt flats alive with flamingoes. Closer in the west are the eight great modern basins of the Marseilles docks where the raw materials of commerce drop on to the long wharves; palm oil from West Africa, phosphates from Morocco,

copra from the Pacific isles. France cannot slake her great thirst for wine from her own vineyards, so here are casks of drinkable Algerian *vin ordinaire*. Wheat and rice, fats, tallow and zinc, the spices of the Orient, swing up from the holds of the freighters of many nations. Guide books tell you with great candour that there are no sights in Marseilles. If you travel only in search of antiquities and architecture, if you follow only in the footsteps of the great, then the guide books are almost right. Mery, the Marseilles poet, declared: “There are only two monuments here, but they are magnificent; the sea and the sky.” Marseilles is my favourite harbour in Europe. For me, a great part of its charm lies along the waterfront; but I have also found great satisfaction in the little, unexpected squares with

their markets and plane trees and old-fashioned tradesmen at work. London has been described as a collection of villages. Marseilles is also a group of little towns, full of contrasts. Women come to the fountain and fill their pitchers. Washerwomen toil over the old stone troughs while a basketmaker follows the trade of his grandfather. Each little corner has its own church, its own herd of goats, worn flights of steps and *cul-de-sacs*, restaurants with glimpses of turning spits and burnished copper pans, kitchens sending out the promise of a Greek *pilaff* or a leg of lamb over a charcoal fire. Marseilles is cosmopolitan but in some of these little squares you step into a true village of Provence. You find Picasso in these places; the mimosa, the tiles, the glazed pottery, the plastered walls, the very scenes he

loved to paint. I was entranced by the market square called Place de Lenche above the quarter destroyed during the war. Old women are selling cherries and flowers. "*Volailles !*" cry the market women. "*Gibiers!*" They offer small plucked thrushes wrapped in vine leaves; bewitching *charcuterie* and pates, terrines and the irresistible *pissaladeira*, that dish of onions stewed in oil and spread on baked bread with anchovies and black olives to enliven the meal. If these sights make you hungry, look for a "hole in the wall" bistro with marble-topped tables and a zinc bar. The longer you hold out the more demanding becomes the appetite. Where else do the purple aubergines look so enthralling? How marvellous the fresh and tender mushrooms appear on their beds of oak leaves. You can imagine dipping those

purple-tinted stalks of asparagus into melted butter or pouring the cream over the wild strawberries. Notice the musky scent of that melon, the sweet promise of the peaches, the heady, juicy aromas of massed grapes. Here are vivid mountains of scrubbed vegetables and cheeses that the expert could identify blindfolded. The solid walls of meat and poultry are not so appetising; they await the magic of the chef, the rich brown transformation scene. But the hams and sausages are worth studying. Artichokes form a tasteful monument in green and bronze. Just think of slicing into those russet pears, ready to yield the very essence of the orchard. This is more inspiring than a jeweller's window for you can afford these gems of the French countryside. Golden plums, scarlet

tomatoes and yellow lemons all lie blazing under the sun. The time has come to taste some of the special flavours of Marseilles.

Marius would probably select the local *pastis* as an appetiser, a fairly strong drink of the absinthe family tasting of licorice. Among his favourite wines is the greenish-white that comes from Cassis and goes so well with a *bouillabaise* lunch. At night he may choose the Marseilles "pick-me-up" of champagne, curacao, bitters and cognac. He may start with grilled *loup* flavoured with fennel and ablaze with brandy. His meat course may be anything from an Algerian *cous-cous* to a superb beef stew Maconnaise that will set his heart soaring. Of course there are few tastes which cannot be satisfied in Marseilles. I do not say that the

Rosbif is a Simpson's; but the Buffet Gastronomique will give you some of the finest *ratatouille* served on this coast, that masterpiece of stewed egg plant; the Taverne Charley puts on a local fish dish, Morne à la Marseillaise, cod with tomatoes, olives, onions and mushrooms; and all the North African dishes are on the menu at the Minaret.

Restaurants in Marseilles are not all temples of gastronomy but thanks to the jolly women at the reception desk in my Canebière hotel I never made a mistake. I had the basil-flavoured soup called *pistou* and the celebrated fillet of beef at Guido, a splendid two-star restaurant close to the old harbour; and I lunched often at the inexpensive Monumental in the Boulevard Dugommier, a place where the snails and omelettes, grilled

sardines and hare were better than the *bifteck pommes frites* and the *côte de pore*. Of course I went to Basso's for evening drinks; to miss Basso's would be like cutting out the Cafe de la Paix in Paris. Sit on the balcony at Basso's and the life of Marseilles passes like a river of colour and sound. Here is all the unfading romance of the great human parade. If you care to spend the money, order something extravagant, caviar or smoked salmon canapes or oysters and a halfbottle of Cordon Rouge. Then the golden age of the Cote d'Azur will return, stretching out all the way from Marseilles to Menton with its brilliant panorama of memories.

Basso's provides an exquisite vista of the Vieux Port, the life of the quays, the small craft in the teeming basin. Up to the middle of last century this

landlocked harbour was the very heart of Marseilles and ships of all types steered in between the stone forts of St. Jean and St. Nicolas to moor at these quays. Cotton-laden schooners from Dixie would land their cargoes alongside rum casks from the West Indies, mahogany and rubber, dates and pineapples, cork and sulphur and sandalwood. Now it is a safe anchorage for yachts, fishing-boats and small vessels.

Ocean liners, the packet boats from Algiers and Oran, the tankers and large freighters go to the Bassin de la Grande Joliette and the other docks stretching along the coast for many miles. Yet the Vieux Port has lost none of its old fascination. All harbours are picturesque but the Vieux Port still has its fair share of rowdy life and dazzling colour. Here the

odours are fried fish and tar. I watched a boisterous crew of bare-footed sailormen scraping the weed from an old schooner that must have known a disreputable past. In the grounds of the seamen's mission I was enthralled by a collection of tropical plants brought there by French seamen from many a sweltering coast and glamorous isle.

When I first went to Marseilles the old harbour was spanned and overshadowed by the steel towers of a high bridge and ugly *transporteur*. Now all that has gone, and it is Le Corbusier's block of flats that people talk about, all balconies and windows. Long ago I saw the feluccas coming in with cargoes of Spanish oranges, but the lateen sails of those old traders have given way to modern spars, brown and white canvas against the calm blue water. If you wish to see and savour

the *fruits de mer* at their best then this waterfront is the place, the Quai des Belges. Eels squirm hopelessly in buckets of sea water. Gurnets open their supplicating mouths and weird fish are set out in formidable array; everything edible from prickly sea-urchins to lampreys, with sea horses and pipe-fish thrown in. This is the short, city end of the old harbour, and it holds enough of the raw *bouillabaise* material for the whole fish-loving city. You will not fail to observe the happy, uninhibited and often attractive girls who meet the boats and sell the fish. And the seagulls riding the mistral.

Fort St. Jean, guarding the old harbour, was filled with the drama of the Foreign Legion when I first entered that sombre building. Five years had passed since the end of World War I

and the French were fighting their Saharan campaigns with the aid of these brutal mercenaries, these thieves and vagabonds interested only in war, wine and women. Fort St. Jean was the depot and the recruits I saw there, shabby and hungry, were certainly not soldiers. No doubt the Legion transformed them, robbed them of their own wretched personalities and made them members of a front line army; made them or broke them. Two decades later, as I have said, I met the Legion in the Western Desert; another two decades passed, and I saw their old headquarters at Sidi-Bel-Abbes in Algeria. I thought the Legion had been disbanded; but no, at Fort St. Jean I came upon them again. Some of the old glory had departed but the Legion still marched to fife and drum and the song "Anne-Marie."

Frederick Mistral, the poet of Provence, drew much inspiration from Marseilles. Charles Dickens found the opening of his "Little Dorrit" here: "Marseilles lay burning in the sun." Here, in the eighteen-seventies came a young seaman from Poland, young Joseph Conrad, speaking French but not English. Along the roaring waterfront of the old harbour this strange genius met some of those characters who appear in his books. Nostromo was a Corsican seafarer Conrad knew. From the old harbour Conrad sailed to the West Indies before the mast; at one of the Vieux Port quays he helped to fit out a sailing vessel for gun-running to Spain. Here he met Paula, the exiled Hungarian girl seeking a new home. When he left Marseilles for England he was still speaking French with a

Provençal accent; this master mariner who became a master of the English language.

Last time I left Marseilles it was by a train called Violet. Summer was ending in Europe and though the city was no longer burning under the sun I felt that it was better here in the south than in the chill and rain of Paris and London. That morning I had taken my coffee and *croissant* in La Canebière as usual and watched the bright-eyed flower women arranging their roses and carnations in the kiosks. It was a moment of sadness for I was sorry to be leaving. In the sparkling air the waiters were setting out wicker chairs and polishing cups and glasses. Unhurried men were reading the *Meridional* or *Provençal* while the poor blind people wandered along

with their sheets of *Loterie Nationale* tickets. At the far end of the street I glimpsed the sea-glitter, the crowded masts and spars of a hundred white yachts and brightly painted fishing cutters.

How much better it would be, I thought, to be arriving at Marseilles now after a night in a sleeping-car from Paris. I remembered hauling out from under the glass roof of the Gare de Lyons at night and listening to the clicking of the rails, the rumble of the tunnels, as I lay snugly between sheets in the darkness. Once I raised the blind and saw a town winking in the darkness, the fields under the moon, the endless rows of poplar trees. In the morning there were the white homesteads of the Rhone valley and a burst of colour, Avignon; and then the wild country

of the Mediterranean coast, the grey and white mountains, gay little villas with pink-tiled roofs, the suburbs of Marseilles. Then I knew that I had done the right thing. The arrival was even finer than the anticipation.

And now I was bound northwards again, leaving by the back door, leaving the riffraff of the harbour, the apache cafes, the oriental vision of Marseilles, the perfume and song, the giant *langoustes* in their baskets of seaweed, the shorn poodles and naked sand terriers from Algeria. I was leaving this strong and redolent *bouillabaise* city, leaving the happy Mediterranean for another year. Ah well, perhaps I could manage another visit another year. The last I saw of Marseilles before the train called Violet left St. Charles Station was the gleam of Notre Dame de la Garde

flashing in the sun. I could almost smell the *maquis*, the fragrant bush that grows on the slope where the cathedral watches over strident Marseilles and the quiet sea.

CHAPTER TWENTY

LONDON'S DOCKLAND

ALL the aromas and odours and flavours, all the cargoes you have known in all your harbours of memory can be recaptured in London's Dockland. Here on the wharves and in the warehouses beside the largest sheets of dock water in the world you may discover reminders of every port on the face of the globe. This is not London, this is the earth. I walked there often during a difficult period of my life; a time when I learnt that the claustrophobia of my lodgings could be cured by a glimpse of wider horizons. Most of you approach London nowadays in aircraft flying high above the Thames so that you see the enormous docks as tiny oblong ponds. Or you may come up Southampton Water and reach London

through the green Hampshire fields and finally enter a frightening panorama of chimney-pots and darkened masonry. Or there is the Straits of Dover entrance, smoked salmon sandwiches and gin and tonic on the Golden Arrow; the hops and oast-houses of Kent on the way to Victoria station. Or there is Tilbury, twenty miles down the Thames from the Tower of London; that odd, frustrating point of entry when your liner often has to wait for hours until the landing stage is clear. Tilbury has been described as "England's backdoor" and nobody likes disembarking there. It is the sea outpost of the Port of London Authority, a flat and desolate spot in the marshes of the Thames estuary. Tilbury is all that many travellers see of London's Dockland.

Long ago the little Donald Currie ships took their South African passengers right up the river and into London Docks. They were tiny, beautiful liners of twelve hundred tons: the first *Stirling Castle*, the first *Warwick Castle*, the first *Roslin Castle*. Shipping men called this service the London Line to distinguish it from the Union Line sailing from Southampton. But that was a century ago. Of course the Union-Castle intermediates were sailing out of London in fairly recent years. Back in the nineteen-twenties, when a six-thousand ton ship was large and one twice that size was an ocean monarch, the intermediates were among the largest vessels to enter the Blackwall Basin in the Isle of Dogs.

Do you know the Isle of Dogs? London's waterfronts are full of

strange and captivating names and memorable landmarks. Start the cruise round dockland as many do at Tower Pier in the shadow of the Tower of London. Here is the Pool of London. Touch first at Billingsgate Market, where the battered fishcarriers from the Dogger Bank, sloops from Friesland, oyster-boats, eel schuuts and bawleys discharge their varied cargoes. Strong odours here, fresh enough at six in the morning. The same odours that Londoners have known at this very spot for many centuries. Odours of crab and shellfish mingle with turbot, soles and flounders. Hundreds of fish-porters carry trays on their strong hats of wood and leather. Steam comes from the room where lobsters are boiled. "Handsome cod! Best on the market." You will never be bored at

Billingsgate but keep clear of the fluent and uninhibited porters. In that enormous warehouse you may see anything from a herring to a turtle. Go early though, for it is all over at nine or ten in the morning. "Had-had-had-had-haddock!"

Most interesting of all the Port of London Authority warehouses, I should say, is the enormous Cutler Street store in the heart of the City. If you enjoy gazing upon luxuries this is the place. Persian carpets, made to last for centuries, are guarded under this roof; Satsuma porcelain from Japan and Chinese blue and white; Havana and Jamaica cigars by the million; tragacanth and gums for pharmacists; the resin called dragon's blood, cochineal and ambergris. Cutler Street can show you figures in carved ivory and lacquer cabinets. Here is vanilloes,

the orchid that grows in Mauritius, the only orchid with a commercial value, for it provides the flavour of vanilla. Such lovely oriental items as Persian coffee-pots have been stored in Cutler Street since the days of the English East India Company, for this was their great warehouse. Vintage wines are kept here in bins. On some days ten thousand bottles are filled with sherry from the casks.

St. Katharine's is the first of London's docks; the greatest docks in the world, stretching from the Pool along the Thames reaches to Tilbury. British coasters and small continental steamers come to rest in the cosy St. Katharine's basins. In the warehouses you will find rare and romantic merchandise from much further afield. There I saw mammoth tusks from Siberia, brittle tusks dug up after

thousands of years in the frozen soil of Siberia; the enormous curved tusks known in the trade as fossil ivory. They formed a strong contrast with the scrivellos from Dar-es-Salaam on the same floor. Then I walked up to the spice floor, redolent with cinnamon and nutmegs, cloves and cassia. Here were expensive perfumes, too, extracts of flowers mixed with fat. But the heady aromas that filled me with a strange blend of nostalgia and satisfaction came to me in the old wine and brandy vaults. Among the puncheons and rotund hogsheads I drew in the breath of distant vineyards and imagined myself in Constantia again. They told me the water I saw in low troughs was for the rats. "They must have a daily water ration or they'll gnaw into the casks", said one of my guides. I also heard that

cockroaches love champagne corks; hence the heavy protective foil. "Cockroaches will tackle a sailor's feet as he lies in his bunk", added my informant. "Only when he's drunk, of course." You can see pools of quicksilver at St. Katharine's, coffee and cocoa, wool and rubber and tortoiseshell. Bags of ginger from Calcutta arrive here; star aniseed and musk. Bales and cases bear the bewildering weights and measures of foreign countries: Turkish pikes, Swedish kappars, Danish toenders and Spanish varras. With the choking London fog outside you may dwell for a space among the riches of the tropics and the trade goods from Arctic lands.

Cross the river to Surrey Commercial Docks and you smell at once the fir, spruce and pine from Canada (and possibly that country's cheese and

bacon); softwoods from the Baltic floating in acres of timber ponds. This is the oldest of London's docks and the only group to the south of the river. Lady Dock was well filled with windjammers when I first roamed there. Among the taverns was one called "Cape of Good Hope".

Return to the north bank and follow the great bend where the Thames flows round the crowded peninsula I have mentioned, the Isle of Dogs. (Some say the royal kennels were once placed there but no one really knows.) Limehouse Reach, Greenwich Reach and Blackwall Reach are the waterways that lap the "isle". Limehouse retains some of its old-fashioned houses with bow-windows, flower-boxes on overhanging balconies, gabled buildings, alleys that once were lined with sail-lofts and rigging-lofts.

When I first knew Limehouse there were opium dens, too, and the jibbooms of sailing ships rose over the dockyard walls and pointed into the windows opposite; but that Limehouse has vanished and so have the limekilns. In the West India Docks of that neighbourhood you are in a world of hardwoods from African forests, teak from the East; grain and nitrates; drums of figs and dates in mat baskets; a vivid world where rum comes on shore at Rum Quay.

When I returned to London year after year with seldom a break I return to a starting point. There it is possible to revive one's youth. I can see horse-buses and vanished fleets. In the docks I stare at the ships of today and find the ships and cargoes of yesterday moving back across the screen of memory. Those dockland scenes and

aromas recall almost every harbour I have entered during my wandering years; a disorderly kaleidoscope of impressions from attics of the brain which seemed to have been locked for ever.

It was a case of glassware bearing the name of Murano that brought Venice before my eyes again. That is not a city one forgets, of course, for it is different from any other harbour just as its gondolas are different from any other harbour craft. Venice, the serene beauty of the lagoon, the old city gradually sinking into the water; these are as memorable as the cries of the gondoliers. "Oleo! Hey! Hey!" But it is a quiet city. You can hear the water licking the houses and some say they do not like the smell of the canals. I am ready to overlook that slight aroma because of the absence of car hooters

and the shriek of wheeled traffic. Look into a piece of Murano glass and you may glimpse again the glories of those low, enchanted islands. And you may hear again the calls of the gondoliers: "*De longo ! Premi ! Scia !*"

Now here is a mahogany log with an iron ring driven into one end. "Heave up there!" I can see the coast of West Africa as twelve tons of timber move into mid-air. West Africa from the lagoons of Grand Bassam to the thirteen thousand feet peak of Mount Cameroon. French exiles designed buildings that might have been transplanted from Normandy. On the slopes of Cameroon the Germans built a *Gouverneurshaus* like a *schloss*, an African castle of stone with the year 1899 on the massive iron gateway. But my favourite castles are those strongholds built along the Gold Coast

by white adventurers long ago; those white castles with ramparts and black cannon, so full of ghosts.

I am on the wharf beside a Bullard King steamer and there comes on the wind a whiff of turmeric. This is the *borrie* of Cape kitchens but for some elusive reason it reminds me of the red-hot radiator called Aden; a night in a spice shop down an alley in the harbour town known as Steamer Point. The old town, the real Aden, is miles away inside the volcanic crater. They told me the torture would be more severe when the south-west monsoon died down. White people lived above their stores and offices at Steamer Point and had their meals on wide balconies in those days before air-conditioning. I sat on a verandah under the punkah and watched the dusty camel caravans arriving from the

desert. The aroma of turmeric was lost now in the less pleasing odour of dried fish from a bullock cart. Dinner that night was better than I had expected. Over charcoal fires the Goanese cooks had done boiled fish, kebabs, chicken patties, roast mutton, stuffed tomatoes and a cheese souffle. The hotel manager told me that I could have a bath in condensed sea-water; the rainfall at Aden was one-fifth of an inch a year. A queer settlement, this Steamer Point; the statue of Queen Victoria and all the Victorian buildings in the Crescent were built at the same time when this rocky, undesirable harbour suddenly became an important coaling station. After dinner the hotel porter invited me to visit the mermaids and assured me they were genuine. Well, they were genuine dugongs, those ugly

sea creatures with mammalian breasts. Aden sends dugongs to the museums of the world. Visitors tired long ago of stuffed dugongs presented as mermaids so the ingenious Arabs now display live girls with mermaid tails; good swimmers with slim figures. I shall not return to Aden for that performance. The brilliant yellow powder called turmeric has given me all of Aden that I wish to see.

In the Pool of London, flying the flag of Western Germany, there is a coaster from a port as old as London. She is a Hamburg ship with beer and cigars in her holds. Hamburg, that ancient harbour which I saw between the wars and also after the war that shattered so much of the city. Many old buildings round the Binnen Alster had escaped, gabled houses

where the shipowners and merchant princes of Hamburg lived, the men who traded with the world. I found that the *bürgerlich* comfort of other days had been restored. In the restaurants of the glittering Jungfernstieg they were serving the traditional eel soup blended with pears and red wine, peas and bay leaves and dumplings. The old Alster still gleamed like an enormous diamond in the heart of the city. Hamburg's network of canals and basins were still there. And along the Reeperbahn, of course, the licentious cabarets were in full swing and the seamen of all nations were frolicking with the *wilde tauben*, the girls of the quarter.

Oranges are coming out of a small French steamer, oranges for London's barrow-boys, oranges with Beirut

markings. Somewhere I found Beirut described as a voluptuous courtesan, standing beside the Mediterranean with a toss of her curls and a flounce of her skirts, a Carmen among the cities. I was at Beirut in wartime and the tiny aerodrome interested me far more than the harbour. Would my pilot land successfully? The aerodrome sloped towards the sea and I thought my chances of escaping from the observer's seat in the nose would be very poor indeed if he crashed in the water. Under such conditions one cannot bother about courtesans. However, there were days when I was able to look down on Beirut from another angle. I drove up the mountain road that leads to Damascus, the breathless road to the heights. Up past market gardens, past groves of oranges, past Bedouin shepherds and

fires of camel-dung, past barleyfields, up towards the cool crests of the Lebanon while the cruisers in Beirut bay dwindled. Then I gazed upon a different Beirut, the low-roofed, red-tiled houses, the banana groves, the multi-coloured blossoms, the forts built by the Arabs against the Crusaders, the curves of the bay. Beirut may be a courtesan but I remember the oranges.

Once I watched an Italian freighter from Naples discharging her cargo of wine and olives, cotton and hemp in St. Katharine's Dock. I reached Naples by the new Autostrada del Sol from Rome, the highway that follows the ancient Via Casilina through the plains. I was saddened in Naples by the *Scugnizzi*, the thousands of homeless boys and girls, orphans or illegitimate children. They sleep in

caves and exist like abandoned animals, stealing food in the markets and fields. Thousands of them, probably more than forty thousand. And dirty, poverty-stricken Naples has never solved the problem. Capri came as a relief. I saw passengers carried on shore from the aerofoil at Marina Grande; seasick passengers laid out on the stone wharf to recover. This was a side of the Capri picture I had not imagined. I must also warn you that the Blue Grotto may become an ordeal in rough weather. You go in through a short tunnel, lying flat and cramped in your boat. I would not like to be trapped in that sea-cave with the waves beating against the tiny entrance. But you can forget such hardships when you walk through the high lanes of Capri and smell the flowers. No wonder so many foreign-

ers of vastly different temperaments have settled on Capri and found it the most satisfying isle on earth.

So now you will understand why I always go back to the East End of London and the docks. The landscape altered during the war but famous landmarks remain. I know the stairs and the piers. Cherry Garden Pier, Golden Anchor Stairs, Wapping Old Stairs and the sinister Execution Dock. I smell whale oil and Stockholm tar. Near the Ratcliff Highway I saunter unmolested along Tiger Bay, feared by old-time sailormen because of the human tigers lurking there. In the docks called "the Royals", those enormous docks at Woolwich named after Victoria. Albert and George V, I renew acquaintance with ocean liners

I have seen before in many far harbours.

One great spectacle I never tired of watching long ago was the fleet of Thames barges, the sailing barges. No longer are their huge red-brown mainsails seen in Bugsby's Reach and Gallions Reach though the fiery language used by their skippers has not become a forgotten tongue. Old prints, some made in the eighteenth-century, reveal barges almost identical in design with those I used to watch in the nineteen-twenties and long afterwards. One that was pointed out to me, the *Favorite*, owned by a cement firm, had been launched in the very early years of last century; she was still trading along the coast of England as far as Newcastle-on-Tyne. Thames barges were not fair weather craft. Barges

have crossed the Atlantic under sail. Two barges sailed unescorted from Britain to Table Bay before World War I, loaded with Swedish bricks used in building the present port office. Seagoing barges left the Pool building London for the North Sea and Channel ports and rode out storms with decks awash. I admired the way their skippers handled them in the thronged Thames reaches. You might not think a barge was a handy craft with her towering mast, hull length of eighty feet, flat bottom and leeboards. Yet each barge was handled by one man and a boy, often the skipper and his son. Fore-and-aft rig was a help. The mainmast was stepped well for'ard and a long diagonal spar called the sprit ran up to the peak of the boomless mainsail. This design allowed the mainsail to be brailed up

in a trice, a great advantage when tacking in and out of the shipping. Skippers knew the river intimately, of course, the tide in midstream, the slack water inshore; they showed tremendous skill in taking in sail and losing way at the right moment. They carried enormous loads and often the helmsman might be seen perched on a bale of hay with the rudder far below him. Leeboards steadied a barge. Some carried two hundred tons of cargo. In a race a Thames barge reached a top speed of fourteen knots. Early this century there were two thousand barges trading on the Thames; when World War II opened there were still six hundred; now there are just a few good specimens preserved as museum pieces or owned by yachtsmen who know their fine points and how to handle them.

Walk out of the West India Dock and there at the gates is a public house known to generations of seafaring men. This is not one of London's historic waterfront inns like the Prospect of Whitby or the Grapes. It is a late nineteenth-century pub with atmosphere, the famous Charlie Brown's. Officially it is the Railway Tavern but although Charlie Brown died nearly forty years ago the pub is still known by the name of this strong and memorable personality.

Charlie Brown took over the pub early this century after an unhappy spell at sea. Many seamen will assure you that it is better to be guv'nor of a pub than master of a ship. Charlie Brown liked seafarers but not seafaring, and seafarers liked him. It became the custom to bring something home for Charlie Brown's pub; anything from a

whangee walking stick from Japan to a stuffed sunfish. As the years passed Charlie Brown's pub became a museum; the sort of museum that made scientists wince. Not only were there genuine snakes and other animals in bottles; the uncritical, triumphant seamen also carried to Charlie Brown all manner of monstrosities and fakes. Mermaids arrived to adorn walls already festooned with opium pipes and Chinese gods. The drums of Africa hung beside Red Indian tomahawks. Here, too, was the gay heraldry of the sea; all the house flags from Blue Funnel to Clan, the national flags of Swenskers and Greeks, the ensign of the "curry and rice navy" and the Cunard "monkey and the nut".

Charlie Brown served many exotic items besides the ordinary English

pub fare in his dining-room upstairs. This room has a curved wooden roof designed to fit the arch of the railway bridge overhead. Some customers stuck to the familiar "cut off the joint, cab, pots." Others would order such deep sea delicacies as slumgullion or "cheesy-hammy-eggy-topside". In the bar Charlie Brown was equally versatile and he claimed that he could produce any sort of drink from a "Bombay oyster" to "Nelson's blood". A short and powerful man was Charlie Brown. He was generous and so trustworthy that seamen who suspected that tigers were stalking them gave him their pay to put in his safe. Charlie Brown rode round Poplar on a white horse in the days before life became difficult for East End horsemen. He was a man of good taste, preferring

Ming vases, Dresden china, ivory and bronze to the phantasmagoria in the bar. However, he did not wish to offend his customers and so he accepted each new bottled horror with exclamations of delight. He kept his own collection in a private sitting-room.

In the days of Charlie Brown the tavern was known as “the friendliest pub in London”. You might have met film stars there; Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford were both won over by the atmosphere. But always there were the seamen and their lively Cockney girl friends. They danced to an automatic piano but when I put in there not long ago a juke-box had been provided and there was a sprinkling of sightseers from the West End. It was a little more sedate, perhaps, in the sense that the

guv’nor and his tough assistants did not have to leap over the bar to deal with knives or fists. But the seafarers still greatly outnumbered the other visitors. Marine engineers still demanded their “wee drappies”. The conversation ranged from the judies of San Francisco to the rats of Rangoon. Men were still coming in from the sea rich with their memories to find inspiration in brown ale.

Beyond the lights and music of Charlie Brown’s lie the exciting suburbs of Limehouse and Poplar. Many seamen never get further than Charlie Brown’s; but on a memorable Saturday night about forty years ago I left that seductive pub in company with the three mates of the S.S. *Roumelian* and rolled up into Poplar High Street. Seven beers were about my limit in those days and at Charlie’s

I had taken all seven. Here I should explain that I had joined the *Roumelian* expecting to sail that day for South Africa. However, the little *Roumelian* had been delayed and here I was with this one last rapturous night to spend in London's Dockland.

Poplar had lost its poplar trees but it had a blue-clad Chinese colony near Charlie Brown's and in those days the men wore pigtails. It was a fine night. Women stood drinking on the pavements and sometimes they tore at each other's hair. The streets were noisy rivers of humanity lined with food stalls and the flaring braziers of chestnut sellers. Pig-trotters and whelks might be more in evidence here than the elegant refreshments offered in the West End; but after seven beers this was life. I remember a man selling eiderdowns at a street

market. "Eiderdowns!" he shouted. "If ye don't buy one may yeer bed fall in and may ye drown in the po under it." Cheerful, vulgar songs drifted out of the pubs, cut through sometimes by harsh police whistles and the sound of heavy boots. I saw the muffin man and heard his bell. I could have bought a blackbird or a linnet in a cage. In a Limehouse street a monkey dressed as a sailor was dancing to the merry jangle of a barrel-organ. No top hats or evening-dress here. This was the land of corduroy trousers, fringed shawls of the coster women, Arabs, negroes, Finns and lascars. Baskets of flowers were to be seen but the aroma of fish and chips was more noticeable and the strong reek of horseflesh was still abroad in the land. Oh, it was untidy, there were dark courtyards that made me shudder and besides the scents of

oranges there were warm bodies and drains. Yet these streets tingled, this was life and tomorrow I would be at sea. At sea, bound for those harbours that have now become my harbours of memory.

THE END

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LAWRENCE GREEN continues to build up an international reputation. Many of the finest British and American magazines have published his stories, his books have appeared in London and New York, and his work has been translated into many languages. Here are some recent overseas opinions of his books:

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those quiet provincial museums where the noise of traffic dies suddenly away, and one finds oneself face to face with the longer vista of man's development, his adaptability and, stretching farther back, with the dilemmas of evolution."